Labyrinth of reflections

Labyrinth of reflections - 1

Sergei Lukyanenko

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Annotation

About the Author:

Sergey Lukjanenko, 30, is one of the today's most popular Russian Sci-Fi writers. His first works were published in 1988. Currently his bibliography includes more than 40 titles of novels and short stories. The Author defines his genre as the «hard action science fiction», but all his works also have a very well defined philosophical aspect. The novel offered to your attention was written in 1997 and became the real 'cult book' of the Russian Internet.

Sergey is married, he lives in Moscow.

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*** Yuri Kalmykov. Translator's notes ***

Several notes for the reader:

1). My English sucks. So it was obviously way too presumptuous of me to try to make a translation like this. It was my love to this book only that made me to venture into this adventure. ;-) I was hoping that this novel is really worth your kind attention (despite my ugly English?).

2). Some opinions expressed in this book by the main or other characters, as well as some words/terms used, might be considered offensive to some Western readers. In fact, one such situation was even showed closer to the end of the novel itself. The concept of "PC" (aka 'Political Correctness') does not really exist in Russia which fact IMHO makes the life much easier and slightly reduces the amount of stupidity that inevitably presents in this life. Despite that, I definitely had to use the 'softened' terms in my translation in order not to outrage the people (not too much at least). But of course, something might have still leaked out. Please consider yourselves warned.

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FIDO at the time of this book's writing. The principles of FIDO's system organization differ from the ones of the Internet. I never was FIDO member, so I know very little. In general, it's free, amateurs' network that allows its members to exchange emails and files. FIDO uses its own proprietary protocol. Special gateways are used to exchange emails with the Internet. Look at www.fidonet.org for more details… But be prepared to get back not the homepage, but some HTML code. { *G* } The guys have forgot to put the { *HTML* } tag into the code of their main page… OOPS.

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The same name in Russian usually can have several forms, reflecting the attitude of the one who pronounces the name to the one named. The number of these forms is as far as I can judge, much bigger than in English. That's why in my translation I preferred to retain the original rules of forming such names and to provide this note. Another important reason is that the Russian name changed according to the rules of doing so in English would sound ridiculous (maybe for me only, as I'm Russian… ;-)), not mentioning that it's not always possible to do this with Russian names at all. Example: John – Johnny. Now try to do the same with, say, my name: Yuri. Yup… My point exactly. Below is the example of how the first name of the main character can be 'bent'. The same often happens to other names in the book. For inexperienced reader it might be confusing, so I apologize… Russia *is* confusing by definition, so bear with it. :-)

Leonid – the complete name.

Lenia (should be read roughly as Lyo-nee-aa; don't pronounce 'double lettered' sounds as too long ones though) – this is slightly diminutive, friendly form used by relatives and friends.

Lenechka (Lyo-nee-chka) – a "pet-name" form, sometimes also used with sarcasm, depending on the context.

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… and so on. No more forms are used in the book, so I'd better not confuse you any more.

Another trick is how the names are formed n general. In particular, the concept of the middle name in Russia. It is not 'given', but rather is the father's name. To be used as a middle name, special endings are attached:

-ovich, -evich for man's middle name (yeah, they are gender specific!),

-ovna, evna for female's middle name.

Examples: Petrovich Alekseevich – men's Petrovna Alekseevna – women's.

Also, the last names of the Russian origin are gender specific too. To women's form the ending -a is usually attached: Kalmykov for me becomes Kalmykova for my Mother, as opposed to her maiden name which is Cellarius – not originally Russian one and as such not gender specific.

There's much more about Russian 'naming system', but I think it's enough said here in order to a). totally confuse an unaccustomed Western reader, and b). to explain the names in the novel for those who managed to overcome the confusion. { *G* } And the last thing:

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Yuri Kalmykov aka Mohatu, Waukegan, IL, February-November 1998.

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Part 1. The Diver

0

I want to close my eyes. This is normal: a colorful kaleidoscope, a whirlwind of bright sparks – it looks beautiful, but I know what is behind this beauty.

The Deep. It is called so in English but it seems to me that the Russian word { *glubina* } sounds better. Having broader meaning, it changes an attractive label into the warning: THE Deep! Sharks and octopuses live here. It's quiet, and presses, presses, presses by the endless space which doesn't really exist.

In general the deep is kind, in its own way of course. It accepts everybody. It requires just a little strength to dive, but so much more – to reach the bottom and to return. The first thing to remember: the deep is dead without us. One must believe and not believe in it at the same time.

Otherwise one day you'll not be able to surface.

1

The first movements are the most difficult. The small room, the table in the middle of it, computer wires from the UPS go to the computer, the thinner wire plugged into the phone jack. The sofa stands by the wall, under the luxury carpet, the small fridge is by the opened door to the balcony. The necessary minimum. Five minutes ago I checked what's in the fridge, so I'm not threatened by hunger for today.

I turn my head, to the left, to the right – the light darkens in my eyes for the moment, but it's only a moment. Nevermind, it happens.

– Are you okay, Lenia?

The speakers are set for the full volume, I frown and say:

– Yes.. Lower the volume.

– Lower the volume… lower… lower… – agrees Windows-Home .

– Enough, Vika. { *complete form: Victoria, never used in the novel* } Good program, docile, quick-witted and friendly one. Not without too much self confidence, as any Microsoft product, but I have to put up with it.

– Good luck, – says the program, – When should I expect you back?

I look at the screen: the woman's face is floating there, framed by orange sparks, the young and cute face but nothing special. I'm tired of the model beauty.

– I don't know.

– I'd like to have 10 minutes for self adjustment..

– Okay, but not more. I'll need all resources in 10 minutes.

The face on the screen frowns: the program extracts the keywords.

– Only 10 minutes, – says Windows-Home obediently, – But I must draw your attention one more time to the fact that the level of the tasks you set for me does not always correspond to the volume of my RAM. The desired extension is…

– Shut up. – I rise. "Shut up" is a definite order, the program doesn't dare to argue after that. I pad to the fridge and get a can of Sprite. The liquid cools the throat. It's almost a ritual – the deep always dries the throat. With the can in my hand I come out on the balcony, into the warm summer evening.

It's almost always evening in Deeptown. The streets are lit by the bright light of neon signs, cars softly growl scudding along the streets, and people move in neverending stream. Twenty-five million of permanent inhabitants: the biggest megapolis in the world. Faces can't be seen from the height of eleventh floor. I finish my Sprite and throw

the can down returning into the room.

– Not ethical… – mutters the computer. Ignoring it I leave the room, put on my shoes and open the door. The staircase is empty and brightly lit, very-very clean. While I deal with the lock, the tiny bug tries to fly in through the half opened door. Oh well, lamers are having their fun. With irony I watch the persistent insect – the steady flow of air blows from the apartment pushing the bug back out… Finally the door is closed, the bug knocks against it in the last effort, a short flash – and it falls on the floor.

– Should I file the complaint to the landlord? – asks Windows-Home. Now the voice comes from silver clips on my shirt's collar.

– Go ahead – I agree. I always forget to explain to the program that the landlord is myself.

The elevator waits for me. Usually I use the stairs… peeking inside other apartments along the way. Nobody lives there anyway… but now I'm in hurry. The elevator goes down – very fast. I pad out into the street, look around, maybe the insect lover is still near? But there's nobody suspicious nearby, everybody mind their own business. The bug was a passer by obviously, a serial work. These are being crushed on the streets, exterminated in the apartments but they keep coming.

I was having this fun too in my time, it was extremely seldom when those bugs managed to bring any interesting info.

– Lenia, the complaint from tenant #1 was received by the "Polyana" company.

I mumble, – Ignore it, – watching the man that walks along the street. Gee, this is something! The mixture of younger Arnold Shwarzenegger and older Clint Eastwood. Very funny. The man notices my sarcastic look and walks faster.

I raise my hand and the yellow limo stops by the sidewalk in an instant.

– Lenia, your complaint was ignored!

– Nevermind…

This can go forever, but I have no time for games now… I get into the car, the driver, a smiling guy with the perfect hairdo dressed in starched shirt, turns to me. I prefer this type of drivers: well trained and brief ones.

– Deep-Transit Company is glad to welcome you!

He doesn't say the name – the program stopped the taxi anonymously.

– How will you pay?

– Like this, – I say getting the revolver out of my pocket and hit the guy on the temple really hard. He tries to block me but it's too late. I look at his pale face, shook him by the collar and order:

– Al-Kabar block.

– This address doesn't exist – says the driver. He's knocked out and conquered.

– Al-Kabar. 8-7-7-3-8. – the simple code opens the access to Deep-Transit's service addresses. I could manage without hitting the driver but in this case information about the ride would remain in the company's files.

– You've got it, – the driver is cheerful and helpful again.

The car is off. I look into the window: residence blocks fly by, packed with skyscrapers inhabited by Deeptown's small fry and huge luxury corporate offices. Long gray IBM buildings, splendid Microsoft's palaces, tracery towers of AOL, a bit more modest offices of other leaders of computer industry.

There are plenty of others of course: furniture, grub, real estate sales firms, travel agencies, transportation companies, hospitals… even the least alive and kicking company tends to open its office in Deeptown.

It's this abundance that Deep-Transit flourishes on. Traveling on foot across the city is a long fun. We fly along the freeways, stop on intersections, enter tunnels and cross road junctions. I'm waiting. I could order the driver to go the shortest way but in this case he would need to contact dispatching office and I would leave the trace…

The city ends abruptly – like the wall of palaces and skyscrapers was cut off by the huge knife. The city loop road and the forest across it, the thick and wild forest… that separates from the fuss those who doesn't want to make a show of themselves.

– Slow down, – I order when we pass the mango growth and approach quite a type of the mid-Russian thicket, – Stop by that next path.

– It's still a long drive to Al-Kabar…

– I said – stop!

The car stops. I open the door and make a couple of steps from the limo. The driver waits obediently. I wait too – for the break in the traffic. Why would we want witnesses? Ah, finally…

I aim to the car and shoot. The revolver is not very loud, the kick is slight, but the car takes fire in an instant. The driver sits inside looking forward. Several seconds, and Deep-Transit has one cab less.

Good. Let everything look like drunk punks having fun… I enter the forest.

– Not ethical… – mumbles Windows-Home from the clips.

– Have you optimized yourself already?

– Yes.

– Okay, now I need help. Look for the cache, access code: "Ivan".

– The glowing tree, – says the program.

I look around. Bingo. Here it is, the huge oak tree, glimmering with the magic blue light. Glimmering for me only. I approach it, put my hand into the hollow and grab the big heavy package. Then I change into white linen shirt and pants, tie a patterned belt around, hang a short sword in a sheath on it, put several little things in pockets. I made this cache several days ago, illegally using one of the computers belonging to the Transcaucasian Railroad's transportation department. The programmers are weak there, they will not notice this little invasion for a long time.

– Where's the stream? – I ask.

– To the right.

I bend over running water and look at my reflection, hit it with my hand several times, then start moving my finger over it, erasing. Now the blond stately robust fellow looks back at me from the troubled mirror. The face is good natured looking and plain to aversion.

– Thanks, – I say to the program and rise. Standing still I enjoy the forest, hell knows for how long didn't I get here out of the city's stench…

– Waiting for me, aren't we, Mr Nice Guy? – the question from behind the back. I turn around – the huge wolf, up to my chest in height, emerges from the bush.

– Maybe for you, – I answer admiring the wolf. Hell, he's awesome! He's really gray, and not simply gray but of exact blackish/grayish wolfs' color. The fur is felted here and there, a burdock is stuck to the right forepaw.

– Shouldn't I eat you, Mr Nice Guy? – asks the wolf and bares his teeth, his fangs are yellow like smoker's, one is missing totally.

I improvise mockingly, – Why would thou brag emptily, run thouself onto my mighty sword? Better serve me well!

The wolf smiles and sits down, – And what the payment will be, the mighty warrior?

– Three grands each, – I inform him.

The wolf nods, satisfied, rubs his muzzle with a paw and asks, – Al-Kabar?

– Good guess.

– Mission?

– Theft.

– Who's the customer?

I just shrug. The answer is as rhetoric as the question. The customers don't like to disclose themselves.

– Let's give it a try, – decides the wolf, – Are you ready?

– Quite.

– Let's go.

I scramble onto the wolf's back and he runs through the forest in relaxed pace. I instinctively duck the tree branches, the wolf snickers. Let him have some fun.

In a couple of minutes we leave the forest. The yellow sand is under the feet now. It's very hot, and wind blows make me to narrow my eyes. The chasm nearly 100 meters wide is ahead, and the Eastern styled city can be seen on the opposite side. Minarets, domes, everything in orange-yellow-green colors. Pretty nice. Not far away from us there's a… well, let's call it the "bridge" across the chasm: the thread, thin as a string. One its end is on the city wall, the other is being held in the hand of the ugly stone statue around 10 meters high. The statue's face is quite terrifying.

– Looks like a tough piece of work… – notes the wolf, – don't you think you've sold yourself too cheap, Ivan The Prince?

– God knows… – I answer examining the statue, – I was warned about the bridge…

– What are you gonna steal?

– Ripe apples…

– Oh, so this is the reason for all this masquerade… – snickers the wolf again, – And what is inside the apples? { *here is a reference to the Russian fairy tales of course…* }

– I dunno, – I spring down from his back, keeping my hand on his fur, – Okay, gimme a second, I'll grab some soda and will be right back…

– Go ahead, – agrees the wolf gazing around.

I half close my eyes.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours… let me go, abyss…

I shivered slightly and stood up; tiny screens before my eyes, the desert, the chasm, the statue and the city in the distance is on them, very nice drawing. Al-Kabar has good designers.

The virtual helmet is heavy, one of the most sophisticated models by Sony: with excellent color screens, great speakers and built-in microphone, with air conditioner producing the air of the necessary temperature. Now it's a desert heat… I took off the helmet and put it on the table, by the keyboard. The familiar woman's face appeared on the monitor.

– Lenia, are you interrupting the immersion? – came out of the speakers.

– No. Hold on.

In the real world my room is the same as in the virtual space. The difference is though: it's not a warm Deeptown's summer evening behind the windows but the rainy St. Peterburgh autumn. It's drizzling outside, the car honks in the distance. I opened the fridge and took a can of Sprite. Let's really drink… I couldn't resist the urge to look from

the balcony. Of course, the empty can that I threw out into the street in virtuality, is not there. Well, let's eliminate the differences.

My hair were damp with perspiration, I wiped them with a shirt that was scattered on the chair, sat by the computer, checked the cable of the virtual suit that connects it with the computer's deep-board. The suit was working, slightly slowing down my movements as if I was walking on the sand. The left leg was slowed down a bit more than the right one: the program glitches again. Ah well, I'll fix it later.

Putting the helmet on is the same as to enter the hot oven. Those Al-Kabar's fouls surrounded themselves with the most uncomfortable conditions…

Again I was looking at the virtual world, but it is yet too much like a cheap cartoon: a grainy image, a nice but rough drawing. Computers can't handle anything better.

And that's okay. What is the deep without the human after all?

I blinked once, relaxed trying to enter virtuality by my own and failed of course. I'm not in the desert, I'm at home, by the keyboard. I had to type the command:

deep [Enter] The multicolor whirlwind flashes out above the desert image. For one more second I could see the screens, the soft cushion inside the helmet, then the consciousness began to drift. The brain tried to resist, but no use, the deep program affects everybody.

But there are some people – one out of 300.000 – those who don't lose the link with reality completely. Those who can surface from the deep on their own. The divers.

People like me, for instance.

The wolf smirks to me, – Got your whistle wet a little?

– Yup.

I examine myself: is everything fine? My body in virtuality – the simple drawing, translated to one or another point of Deeptown or its suburbs by the computer, but the sword on the belt and little things in the bag are not just simple pictures. These are shortcuts, program launchers which I'll need soon.

– Here is the plan, – I decide. – I'll cross the bridge alone. Then I'll bring out the trophies and we take to our heels.

– The decision is yours, – agrees the wolf.

I walk on the sand, the hot wind doesn't calm down, it even seems that the grains of sand sting the eyes. This is not the helmet's merit anymore but my brain feels what I should have been feeling in the real desert..

The statue steadily comes closer and becomes more and more real. The horned head with grinning mug, the hands bulging with stone muscles. Some kind of evil genie possibly, I'm too weak in Arabic mythology. The thin thread is held by the monster's left hand.

The horsehair bridge.

I start climbing up the monster's leg. How ridiculous must my body look like now in the empty apartment – shaking, pulling up by the air…. don't loose concentration!

The last meter is the most difficult. I lean against the thorny stone knee, try to reach its hand – and fail. Definitely, lawful Al-Kabar's visitors have some other way….

As for me, I have to climb the granite phallus of the monster first. I can hear the wolf snickering below. Shit. Isn't it really funny?!

I'm on the palm finally, trying the thread with my foot – it shakes slightly. Very-very far below – the cliffs and blue band of the river.

– Use some courage, hero! – shouts the wolf.

Common virtuality inhabitants can't cross this bridge… something's wrong here.

The hand I'm standing on starts shaking and closing into a fist slowly, the thread bridge shivers, ready to tear. The awoken monster's grinning muzzle is over me.

– Who are you? – he roars so loud that my ears ache. In Russian by the way!

– A visitor! – I shout trying to free my feet from the grip of the granite fingers.

– No visitor comes with the forbidden! – laughs the monster.

His forefinger flies towards me as if to crush me flat. I duck forcefully, but the monster just points at the sword.

Yeah, right, this is not Deep-Transit's simple and defenseless driver program, this is an excellent security system with pseudo intellect, one degree higher than Windows-Home. How did it determine my native language?

– The visitor doesn't come uninvited!

– I was invited!

– By whom?

I have to stake my all…

– You don't have the right to know this name!

– I have the right for everything, – informs the monster.

And the fingers clench.

Now the exit into reality is expected, as a result of the 'deadly impact', otherwise the brains can imagine the real pain shock, with all its consequences. Only those suicidal would turn off safety locks of the deep program.

Or the diver.

My battered body is scattered on the monster's palm, the skull is crushed, one eye looks into the hot dusty sky, another one – at the stony nail. The genie laughs loudly, satisfied and shouts:

– You who came as a wolf, remember his fate!

Bingo. This is how he figured out our language: he just heard us talking.

Though, he wasn't smart enough to understand whom is he dealing with…

The monster turns into stone again. I wait for one more second, then stand up. The body assembles back together slowly. The ordinary user would now wake up in reality by the reproachfully chirping computer.

Does the security program consider the existence of divers?

The monster is motionless. I'm dead, long time dead.. I step on the hair bridge carefully…

– Who are you?!

Oh my, again… Looks like it reacts to the touch of the bridge. Even worse.

– The one who is not at your mercy! – I reply.

– But whose mercy you're at?

Something new.

– Allah's, – I answer randomly.

This time the monster just slams me with the free hand, so that I partially flow over the palm's edge and utters instructively:

– It's not for you to mention the name of the Almighty, you thief.

The wolf rolls on the sand laughing maniacally. I can see it with the eye that stayed intact.

Well, the program's humor seems to be more American than Arabic… I lie in thought, then stand up again. The monster is yet still.

– Any detour, Vika?

– This is the only external channel, – informs me my computer immediately.

The voice is drifting and lifeless… I really need to upgrade the RAM… – All other Al-Kabar's lines open by the order from inside only.

– Force solution? – I touch the sword's handle. The local virus is tiny, I even don't need to download it from home. To unsheathe the sword, to make one blow and…

– The channel will be destroyed.

Oh sure. Not for nothing does the monster hold the bridge in his hand. If the security program is destroyed – the hair above the chasm would break.

– Fuck.

– I can't understand…

– Shut up….

I examine the monster. The stone eyelids half closed, little drool stalactite hangs from its mouth. Just a fake, entourage for nervous virtuality people. Just an ordinary security program on the server gateway. Somewhere inside the hair is the communication channel

with Al-Kabar block. The signals circulate along, ordering to let pass or to crash the uncalled guest…

– Hey, Ivan The Prince, I'm in hurry! – shouts the wolf.

Right, it's high time to act. So far the program hurled me back independently, but the next time the real Al-Kabar's programmers might take over, both 'virtualists' and conservative ones…

– Animate the Shadow, – I order.

The dark silhouette on the palm stirs, gains the volume, stands up, fills with color. I make an ugly face to my copy, it grimaces in return.

– Move the Shadow. Look for the password, – I order again.

One second – the computer 'moves' its HD, loading everything known about Al-Kabar into the shadow's memory. Then the copy steps on the bridge. Of course, it'll yield nothing, except some time.

– Who are you?! – roars the monster, grabbing the shadow. I hardly manage to avoid its moving fingers, crawl along the clenched fist, jump on the thread…

– And who are YOU? – I hear from behind. Then the right hand's blow knocks me down to the monster's feet. I break into tiny pieces, lie supine looking up at my twin that wallows on the palm.

Yeah right… Great job.

– Who are you? – asks the monster again.

– The one not on your mercy, – the twin keeps distracting the guard.

– Whose mercy you're on then?

– Only mine.

Interesting, how many more different deaths did the monster save for the thieves? Just look at his teeth… horns.. well, even the phallus might do too..

– Why did you come here?

– To find the power over myself.

– Go ahead and find it.

The palm opens, the monster turns into stone. The twin stands on the edge of the palm motionless.

– Vika, where were the shadow's answers taken from?

– From the open Al-Kabar's file: "Virtual job request procedure".

The wolf pads closer, whispers, – What happened?

I explain.

– Hey, Ivan The Prince, aren't you Ivan The Stupid by chance too? { *yet another folklore hero ;-)* } I can't beat that. Of course I HAD to look through ALL files, not just through the stolen data about the inside organization of the block.

– Vika, merge.

I'm kinda being pulled into the shadow, now this body is the main

one.

The one already allowed to step on the bridge.

The victory is Pyrrhic though. The guard reported about the visitor that tries to cross the bridge. This means I'll be warmly welcomed there.

The single that tries to fight the crowd is doomed, in any space, even virtual one.

Well, nothing else to do. It's time to go… along the hair bridge.

Honestly, this procedure is almost impossible, even for the professional rope-walker. This bridge is just that: the thread above the chasm. The towers of Al-Kabar are alluring and unreachable in the distance.

Abyss-abyss… I'm not yours…

I closed and opened back my eyes. The picture is before me: the chasm, the thread, the buildings in the distance. Just funny… Looking where I step, I started to shift my feet along the thread carefully.

It's just a picture. It's no gravity there, the drawn body can't have a center of gravity. Just step on the thread and everything will be okay… Funny thing, as it turned out, the bottom of the chasm is not drawn at all, meaning that it was me, my mind which added the mountain river down there. Somebody else could see trees or lava flowing.

Now, when my subconsciousness doesn't take part in the game, the distance is covered fast. Half a minute – and I'm over there.

The thread ends at the crest of the city wall. The crest is wide and there's already a couple of people, obviously waiting for me. They're drawn pretty well – kind of pot-bellied robust guys with swords on their belts, one in the turban, and the other just bald. Stepping on the wall "bricks" I whisper:

– Vika, turn the deep on.

Fiery sparks before my eyes. Yes, do I abuse turning the subconsciousness on-off today. Severe headache, heartbeat and general feel-down are guaranteed tomorrow. Nevermind. Good if I manage to live until tomorrow at all.

And here are the welcomers – now in the normal human form.

– You reached us quick, guest, – says the bald one. He has a friendly face of an Arabic guard from the production of "Sindbad The Sailor" done for kids. The second one looks grotesquely Arabic too, but is much more sinister, he flashes his eyes and holds the sword handle tightly. Oh great, the only thing I ever missed is the battle virus in my computer.

– The others were slower?

– Nobody ever crossed this bridge before, – kindly informs me the bald guard, – It's impossible for the human to keep balance on the

horsehair.

– It means that the heaven stays empty, – I sigh. Looks like it's not me who leads the events anymore but they lead me. I don't like this turn…

– Well, but the Hell does always have plenty of space for everybody.

Nice promise.

– Move it.

Nothing else to do but to obey. Let's be submissive and polite. When in Rome, do what the Romans do.

The wide steep stairway leads down from the city wall. We descend. The good-natured guard before me, the wheezing ill-wisher behind me. I ignore him carefully, looking at the bald patch of the friendly one. He has a big wart exactly on his cinciput. Interesting, is it really drawn or my subconsciousness tricks me? It's not reasonable to leave the deep just to check such a trifle though.

The Al-Kabar block is not big, not more than a square kilometer in virtuality. It means nothing though. Some companies, like Microsoft for instance offer whole palaces for their employees to work: it's cheap and effective. Some others do with such puny little rooms that one can wonder – what is virtuality here for at all.

Obviously Al-Kabar is one of those. I peek into the window of the low stone building that we pass by.

Equipment… too unfamiliar one to identify, several people by the tables. One of them holds a test-tube in his hands. Ha, chemical experiments in virtuality! Something new. It's worthy only if they work on some very poisonous substances… or bacterial environments. Okay, let's note this.

– Where are you taking me? – I ask the guard. The Bald Patch doesn't turn around, but answers:

– To the Director of the corporation.

He doesn't name him, but it's said enough. Al-Kabar is an international corporation that specializes on pharmaceuticals, telephone communications and oil extraction if I'm not mistaken. Despite all Arabic entourage, it is managed from Switzerland. Friedrich Urman, it's director is the person important enough to not talk with just any visitor.

The warmest welcome is being prepared indeed…

We stop before the little wooden grape twined arbor, I'm pushed forward from behind and enter. The guards stay outside.

The lodgement looks much more spacious from inside, the huge pavilion, the pool in its center where shining sleepy fish floats slowly. The table with two armchairs stands nearby, lots of flowers, I even start feeling scents.

And nobody.

Well, let's wait; I sit down in the armchair.

A slight fog before my eyes, an expected one. My communication channel is being examined. They try to determine where I came from, the volume of data I can receive and transmit per second, the programs that I have with me…

Go ahead, do your job… Six routers, rented for one single use that transmit the signal, and each of them tough enough to break. And in the end

– the commercial Internet gate in Austria through which I entered virtuality.

I'll leave the trace but it'll lead to nowhere.

They can break my connection at any moment, kick me out of the block, but this will give them nothing… all thingies-programs that I have will be invoked immediately. A little will remain for examination. But I'm very interesting to them, no doubt…

– The first router is traced, – informs Windows-Home.

Pretty quick. I shake my head and at this moment the opposite armchair is not empty anymore.

Mr Friedrich Urman neglects Arabic coloring, he wears blinders, variegated shirt; an aged, lean and serious man.

– Good afternoon… diver, – he says. In Russian. The voice sounds unnatural, filtered through the interpreter program.

So this is the reason for such an honor.

– I'm afraid that you're mistaken, Mr Director.

– When we created the bridge half a year ago, we pursued the single goal, Mr Diver: to detect you. The person being in virtuality could never cross it, – Urman smiles sparingly, – For the first time in my life I can see the real diver.

One-zero… not in my favor.

– Well, for the first time in my life I can see the real billionaire.

– So you see, our meeting is fruitful already.

Windows-Home whispers,

– The second router was traced…

Urman frowns – looks like he's informed about something too. Then inquires:

– Excuse me, how many servers did you pass through to come here?

– Unfortunately, I don't remember.

Urman shrugs.

– How may I refer to you?

– Ivan The Prince.

Brief pause, then he smiles, Somebody have explained him.

– Oh, the Russian tales' hero! Are you Russian yourself?

– Does it really matter?

– You're absolutely right… Well, Mr Diver, as far as I understand, you penetrated our block illegally…

– Oh really?! – I'm in shock. – To be honest, I just was looking for a job. I saw your ad, crossed the bridge… obeyed those strange guards…

One-one.

Friedrich Urman clasps his hands:

– Oh, sure! We have no complaints whatsoever, Mr Diver. Except maybe… those odd things that you have with you.

Slowly, demonstratively I empty my pockets: a comb, a handkerchief, a small mirror.

– Here. Do you want me to give you my sword?

Urman waves his hands:

– Geez, what for? We surely aren't gonna fight, are we? Let's just talk…

– Third router was traced.

– It's such a pity that less and less time remains for our talk, – I sigh.

– Yes, it's never enough time. Well, Mr Diver, I have the reasons to suspect that some persons would like to obtain some of our technologies, and even managed to hire a diver… in order to reap where they have not sown.

– The apples, – I add.

– Exactly. We have a good Russian programmer working for us, he created a nice design for data storage… – Urman claps his hands and the air dims between us, becoming dense. One moment – and the small tree appears, all sown with the fruit. – I suppose that the most interesting thing among these is that small green apple on the lower branch.

I look at the desired fruit. It's small, not ripe and wormy.

– How do you think diver, how much could our competitors pay for this file?

– Around ten grands, – I raise the price somehow.

Urman looks at me surprised, makes it more exact:

– Ten thousand dollars?

– Yes.

– To be honest, even 100 thousand would be not enough… Okay. Let's assume that I offer 150.000 to the person that tries to steal the file, on the condition that he agrees to work for us… for the regular, very good salary.

– What is that, cure for cancer? – I ask.

– No. In that case it would be priceless. It's just a cold reliever, but very, very effective. We're about to start its production but only

after the less effective medicines are sold out. So, what do you think about my offer?

– I'd hate to let you down, – I say trying hard not to think about the offered amount, – But the divers' code explicitly forbids agreements like this one.

– Very well, – Urman rises, – I expected such an answer, and I respect your position.

He pads to the tree and plucks the apple with some effort. His lips are moving: he obviously says the password. – Take it.

The apple is in my hand. It's very heavy: two Megs at least. It's useless to try to copy it, the only way is to bring it out with me. I put it in the pocket – I mean, attach it to my virtual 'shell', then look at Urman.

– I stake all, – says Urman seriously. – I sacrifice an extemely perspective technology. You can give it to Mr Shellerbach and convey my personal kind regards to him. There's one single thing I'm asking for – please, return here after that and let's discuss the permanent cooperation. I wouldn't hide from you the fact that right now we are in a desperate need of diver's services.

– Fourth router is traced… fifth router is traced… alarm! Alarm!! Alarm!!!

– Okay, – I rise too. So sudden.. I never suspected that the serious businessmen are able to make such generous gestures. – I promise to come. But if you'll excuse me now…

– No Mr Diver, now YOU please excuse me. You'll easily leave our territory, but not before your real address is determined, in order to guarantee the validity of the promise just given.

The trellised pavilion's walls darken like being covered by thick cloth. I make a step – it's really difficult. Urman starts moving jerkily, everything flows in my eyes, the apple in the pocket draws me to the floor with great force, Windows-Home's voice dims and loses any tones:

– Al…a…rm… a…l…rm…

So that's how it goes. Billionaires are good players. Meaning, their servants – to which number they try to add me.

– Vika, drop the details! – I whisper trying to reach the table. I wish the program would understand and obey without more questions…

The pavilion changes. Ornaments are gone, the flowers lose buds and some small leafs, the texture of Urman's shirt becomes rough. But I manage to reach my toys on the table and grab the handkerchief. These personal hygiene thingies are very useful.

One wave of the handkerchief, slow as if underwater, and the shiny plane of light cuts through the falling asleep pavilion's little

world. Some people call this program "the sticker", others – "the road". Both definitions are true. The program searches for someone else's communication channels and starts using them for its own benefit.

Very-very new, rare and almost faultless program.

A part of the wall ruins, opening the exit out to the street. Obviously, I utilized Urman's personal channel. I grab the comb and the mirror and run.

The sharp ragged spears start to emerge from the wall: Al-Kabar's security program. I jump forward in a desperate attempt to pass between the spears.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours…

The air conditioner blows icy air out. A slowly moving strip is on the screens – percentage of transmitted data, and the gap, contracting rapacitly under it – the comm channel being tightened. This is how the beauty of the most intense virtual fights looks like in reality. Stripes, characters, digits. The battle of the programs, modems, bytes of data.

Hell no! It's too disgusting and dull.

– Deep! – I ordered.

The head responds with pain – I don't care. I storm between the spears, fall on the floor. The shiny band flows along the street crashing everything on its way. The buildings crumble, the wall blows up with a thunder-like sound. The band flies across the chasm. Now full speed forward!

Those two guards run to intercept me, both with swords, but I've unsheathed my own already. Whose virus is faster and more agile?

Mine.

This is the gift from Maniac, my friend a computer virus specialist. The deadly gift – the air under my sword takes fire and hits the guards with a dragon belch. They burn in an instant turning into charcoal black carcasses.

Maniac really does love cool effects. Now the guards' computers are completely busy with an extremely important task of calculation of PI number with a million digits precision. They even have no resources left to eject the operators from virtuality. Very good, let them lie in the deep for a while instead of changing the computers.

– Not ethical… – mutters Windows-Home dolefully.

I rush along the band. The channel is excellent, I'm above the wall in a couple of seconds. The band under my feet pushes me forward. I laugh loudly and look back.

Wow!

Just look what's going on in Al-Kabar! The streets are flooded with people, the other guards already run along the band, and something huge, snaky and unpleasant crawls out from one of the

buildings. It's better not to look longer.

Faster…

The band jumps over the monster genie and sets itself against the ground. The guard is alive again, it shakes, outstretches his paws up so that the hair bridge breaks but can't reach me. Neither can he move from his position: it's fixed firmly on its comm channel.

On the last meters the band starts shaking suddenly and tries to kick me back: Al-Kabar's programmers have restored the control.

But it's too late, I'm on the ground already and the Wolf rushes to me:

– Jump on me NOW Ivan, time to scarper!

I leap on the wolf in an instant, look back for the last time. The guards jump down from the band and the winged shadow soars above the chasm.

– Sux!!! – I mutter the favorite virtual folks' curse. 'Sux' means a 'frozen' computer, a glitching program, an acescent beer, a trolleybus that had left the stop just at the moment you arrived… In this case – such an intense pursuit. We don't have time to copy the data from the apple comfortably and to dissolve in the thin air afterwards. We must run and tangle our traces.

My partner in the wolf's hide can do it perfectly.

We rush across the desert, then turn into the forest. The blurry shadows run behind – the guards sacrifice their scary images for speed.

– Is the pursuit close, Ivan The Prince? – asks the wolf .

– Very close! – I confess.

– Gee, I'll never get you outta here Ivan! – roars the wolf .

I take the comb and throw it behind my back. A deafening crackle, the comb's teeth scatter around, fall on the ground and start growing turning into huge trees. Guards' movements between them become slow as if they're falling asleep – the space is overfilled with the unexpected objects and the enemies' computers are jammed by the mass of junk data.

Unfortunately, this is an old trick and there's plenty of methods to fight it. Most guards manage to narrow the field of vision or to drop image details, passing the dangerous place successfully. To be exact, not the guards themselves did that but their deep-programs. Those stopped were mostly enthusiastic amateurs pursuing us just for fun.

– Oh Ivan, my strength is exhausted! – screams the wolf. I can't understand whether he's really worried or plays the fairy tale so recklessly.

It's the mirror's turn now. When I throw it back, my usually restrained Windows-Home screams:

– NOT ETHICAL!

Sure it's not! This is not an innocent prank with quick growing baobabs anymore, and even not the local virus sword but a logical bomb of extreme power.

Where the mirror fell, the lake appears and starts widening. Some guards run into it and 'drown', disappear without a trace. Others stop on the bank helplessly. All comm channels are blocked completely in this area of virtuality. It'll be impossible to pass here for at least two more hours, then the lake will dry.

– Where have you got these thingies? – asks the wolf.

– From Maria The Skillful, – I answer after a second of hesitation. Honestly, it was that nickname that gave me an idea of today's masquerade. The wolf won't betray, he might need the similar programs too one day.

– I'll note that, – says the wolf gratefully, glances back quickly and asks, – What is your third entree, the mighty warrior?

The dragon flies after us – the battle interceptor program of the highest grade. The dragon has three heads – obviously three human operators plus the usual weaponry: claws, teeth and flame. A hundred of various viruses and tough protection. It slows down just a little above the lake.

– The third was used the first, – I confess.

– Couldn't you take more?! Play fairy tales too much, just three items and that's it? – growls the wolf. He isn't right of course, one can't carry too many viruses, but we both start losing the nerve.

The wolf decides something and turns aside sharply, running even faster. Then he stops by the big mossy stump, so suddenly that I fly on the ground over his head, examines me intently and jumps over the stump.

I prefer to use the water to change my image: a stream, a river or at least a pot full of water. The werewolves are conservative though.

The wolf capsizes and turns into human: a young man in modest gray suit and patent-leather shoes. My diver friend is as elegant as always. As soon as landed, he stands, jumps again and turns into my exact copy.

– Vika, the stream, – I order getting his idea. But the former wolf already grabs me by my shoulders and throws over the stump shouting, – No time for this bull!

It's a small pleasure to be affected by the foreign morphing program. I just have time to say: "Vika, freeze" to prevent the careful Windows-Home to resist the change.

For a long time wasn't I in the wolf's hide, since when virtuality just appeared and everybody had fun with morphing. Luckily, I don't have to stand on all fours, I change only visually. I take off the sword, give it to the new Ivan The Prince, he grabs the weapon and jumps

onto my shoulders.

– Come on, you lazy sack of bones! – he shouts hitting my sides with his heels. I dash forward, and just in time: the dragon appears above the trees. It swoops on us and releases three flame streams. The fire flares up right on our way.

– Run! – screams my partner and adds in a whisper, – See you tonight, at the usual place…

I jerk sharply, throw him down from my back and flee, hurled by curses.

The dragon circles above for little longer, then lands by the fairy tale hero. The cowardly partner doesn't interest him. Just as expected.

I run away, whispering:

– Vika, copy new files!

The fight rages behind me. Not for long though, the werewolf just has time to hit the dragon with his sword once, but the virus is harmless to the armor of the interceptor program. The white snowy cloud arises around the werewolf and he ceases to move.

Freezing. It's over. My friend have left the game – he's at home already, takes off his virtual helmet, and his exact copy stands before the dragon – with all stolen programs… in case he had any, of course.

The dragon hits him with his paw gently and it scatters down in icy fragments. All three heads bow down to him, searching for the stolen apple.

I'm running away.

The apple in my pocket becomes lighter and lighter – the data flows into my computer. I dodge between the trees, then stop so that it'd be easier for Windows-Home to download the file. The dragon's roar reaches me, it haven't found the apple and understood what happened. Who is faster?

The dragon flies up again. It will find me easily – movements in virtuality leave traces. I just stand still and wait.

– File transfer completed.

Yes! I won!

– Exit, – I order.

– Really? – asks Windows-Home.

– Yes.

– Exit from virtuality, – informs the computer. The colorful sparks flash before my eyes, the world loses its bright dyes, turns into the pale and flat picture.

– You successfully exited virtuality! – cheerfully informs Windows-Home. The voice from the headphones is sharp and too loud. The deep blue color with a small figure of flying or better to say, falling man is on the helmet's screens, the well known emblem of the Deep, the Abyss, the virtual world.

After taking off the helmet I looked at the monitor, blinked several times. The same picture there.

– Vika, thanks.

– No problems, Lenia, – answered Windows-Home. I taught it this small courtesy a week ago, it's always nice when the program looks more humanized than it really is.

– Terminal.

The blue changed into the terminal's panel. I manually connected to the sixth router, the last one to remain intact and canceled my access. Then I canceled my temporary address in Austria.

The main threads are broken. Try to find me now Al-Kabar guys, filter all files in search for Ivan The Prince. The diver have broke free from the trap.

Not using the voice control anymore, I shut Windows-Home down, entered 3D Norton's table, opened disk D: where all my virtual trophies are stored together with a small viruses collection. Here it is, my apple: 1.5 Meg file. Looks like the simple file for Advanced-Word. A couple of smaller files are attached to it though… security programs? I launched the scanner, especially developed for these types of surprises.

Yup, just as I thought: identification programs which are supposed to destroy the file if it gets to somebody else's computer.

We know this far too well… And are insured against it for a long time already: identification programs simply can't see my computer. It's these dangerous things that I always store on D: disk. The scanner located some surprise inside the text file itself too – a tiny program, supposedly starting in response to an attempt to read the file. Just as should have been expected. I copied the file to the magnetic diskette, then to the optical one and started to disembowel the fruit of Al-Kabar's orchards.

It turned out to be impossible to kill the security programs without destroying the file. I had to just knock them out, disable them. Then I got busy with the inner surprise. I cut the file into twenty pieces, extracted the guard program. It turned out to be an absolutely unfamiliar polymorph virus which (and it was most unpleasant) have managed to stick to my computer. After two hours of intensive work, interrupted only twice – to take an aspirin tablet and to visit bathroom, I became convinced that I'll not be able to disable the virus.

It was late evening, the time when hackers just start working. I packed the virus with a text fragment and called Maniac.

I had to wait a couple of minutes until he picked up the phone. I was lucky: he easily could hang about in virtuality, indifferent to any calls, fires, floods and other annoying trifles of life.

– Yes?

– Maniac, it's me.

Hacker's voice softened a little.

– Hi Lenia, what's up?

– The new virus for your collection.

– Toss it here! – said Maniac, hanging up instantly.

I started the modem and sent Al-Kabar's surprise to greedy hands of the virus creator, then opened the fridge, took out bread and sausage and moved to the kitchen to set the teapot on the stove. It'll take Maniac at least half an hour to examine the virus. For the first ten minutes he'll break it, then for 20 minutes more he'll admire its structure, will laugh looking at unsuccessful solutions and frown finding some ideas he missed himself. Right since the Moscow Convention that resigned with the inevitable and legalized the production of nonfatal viruses, he specializes in making them. His viruses are excellent, capable of freezing any computer, but never destroying the data.

But Maniac called in three minutes.

– Visited Al-Kabar, huh? – asked he in a honey sweet voice.

– Yes. – it made no sense to lie, – You managed it so fast?

– I didn't manage it. This is my virus, buddy.

I couldn't find anything better than to mumble, "Well… sorry about that…"

Maniac, in the real life just Sasha { *Alexander* }, was deadly serious:

– You what, have stolen a program from them?

– Not exactly… But in general yes, this was hidden in the file…

– Have you contacted anybody via modem? I mean, since you received the file.

– No.

– Lucky you, – informed Maniac, – You see, this is not just an ordinary virus, it's a postcard.

I didn't understand and Maniac explained:

– A postcard with return address. If the virus detects the communication hardware on the computer, it attaches the second letter to any of yours: a tiny, invisible one… a postcard. Without any text but with your return address. The letters leave together but later, already from the other computer, the postcard is forwarded directly to Al-Kabar's security department.

I froze inside.

– I've killed the virus on the computer…

– You've killed not the virus itself, but its false 'reflections' created by it especially for distraction. Commonly used programs don't detect the postcard yet, it's still too rare.

– What should I do?

– Treat me with beer, – smirked Maniac, – Now you'll receive a special 'cure' from me, the special antivirus. There's no hints in it, you just start the .BAT file and it checks your machine. Note that it'll work for long, this is not a commercial product, just … my personal insurance from my own virus.

– Thanks.

– Um-hm.. Lenia, you've nearly got into really big trouble.

– Too many hackers were bred, – I growled out, – Shit, why haven't you ever tell me about this thing?

– But how could I know you are so deep in computer burglary? – reasonably objected Maniac, – Next time let me know when you are about to break into cool places. Okay, start your modem.

In a couple of minutes I launched antivirus.. It was really slow, informing that a postcard is detected every minute. The polymorph have plagued the whole computer.

It was really close.

Glancing at the screen, I've built a huge sandwich, poured a hot tea into the cup and came out to the balcony. It was already dark outside and raining slightly, the air was damp and cold.

It's overconfidence that kills divers. We don't fear the virtual world's dangers and this lulls our vigilance.

But the most annoying thing is that we are all amateurs. For some reason, no divers shape out of hackers – they percept the virtual world as the real one.

Though it was me, the so-so computer artist from the small computer games company that went broke three years ago and who got an old computer as a dismissal pay, who DID become a diver. One of the hundred on this planet.

I was lucky.

Possibly, I was just lucky.

10

Not more than five years ago the virtual world was nothing more but the sci-fi writers' creation. Computer networks, virtual helmets and suits already existed, but all this was only profanation. Hundreds of games were created where one could move in the spacious and colorful cyberspace but virtuality even couldn't be mentioned.

The world created by computers is too primitive, it can't be compared even with cartoons, not to mention movies. Thus, the real world is completely out of question. One could run around in the drawn labyrinths and castles, fight with monsters or with his own friends who sit by the computers as well. But even in the worst feverish ravings it was impossible to confuse reality and illusion.

Computer networks allowed people all over the world to communicate, but it was nothing more than exchanging character lines on the screen… in the best case – the drawn face of your interlocutor could be on the screen too.

The real virtuality required too powerful computers, extremely high quality communication lines, titanic work of millions of programmers. It would take several dozens of years to build the city like Deeptown.

Everything had changed dramatically when Dmitry Dibenko, the former hacker from Moscow (now the wealthy US citizen) invented The Deep: a tiny program influencing human subconsciousness. They say he was crazy about Castaneda's books, liked to meditate and smoked grass. I surely believe in it. His former friends confess that he was cynical and lazy, a sloven and very so-so professional. In this I do believe too.

But it was him who gave rise to the deep. Ten second clip displayed on the screen is harmless by itself. If shown on TV (I heard it was dared to be done in some countries), the TV watcher won't feel anything and will not become a movie character. Dmitry himself just wanted to create a pleasant meditation background for his computer, and he did, let it circulate along the Net and didn't suspect anything for two more weeks.

But then, one day some Ukranian guy looked at the colorful plays of the Deep program, shrugged and launched his favorite game – Doom: drawn corridors and buildings, terrible monsters and brave hero with a shotgun in his hand. A simple 3D game, the whole era of 3D games was started with it.

And he 'fell' into the game.

An empty floor of the Patenting Bureau (it was a late evening) where the guy worked, disappeared. He couldn't see his computer

anymore. His fingers were hitting the keys making the drawn figure to move, to turn, to shoot, but it seemed to him that it's HIM running along the corridors, ducking the fiery balls and snarling monsters' mugs. He understood that this is just a game, but he didn't know why it became real and how to exit it.

The only thing he could do in this situation was to go until the very end. And he did it despite the fact that it turned out to be much more difficult now.

The slight wound now became not just the lowered percent of 'strength' on the screen, but something the wound is supposed to be: pain, weakness, fear. He realized that the bloody floor becomes slippery, that the stony slab behind which the shells are hidden is really heavy, that ejected shells are hot and rocket launcher's recoil nearly knocks him off his feet, that the health potion is bitter and loathsome, that the armor turned out to be made of thin metal plates and is pretty lightweight – but a little too baggy and has uncomfortable ties on the back. In around three hours the shotgun trigger started to jam, he had to hit it slowly and carefully, moving the finger from side to side.

By 5 am he finished the game. The monsters were cast down. The game menu had appeared on the stone wall before him and he pushed the shotgun's barrel into it with a scream.

The illusion dissipated, he was sitting by the peacefully droning computer, his eyes watered, the keyboard under his stiff fingers totally ruined. The key he was using as a shotgun trigger was stuck.

The guy shut down the computer and fell asleep right by the table. The employees that soon arrived noticed that his face and hands were badly bruised.

He told about what happened and of course nobody believed him. Only by the evening, thinking about what could happen, he remembered about Dibenko's meditation program and suspected wrong.

The whole world was in fever a week later. All corporations except computer and software ones suffered tremendous losses: everybody starting from programmers and ending with secretaries and janitors, wanted to visit the cyberspace personally.

With Dibenko's light touch the program was named 'Deep' and began its march all over the world. The studies proving that around 7% of people are not affected by the abyss were still ahead, as well as those proving that being in virtuality for more than 10 hours a day might lead to nervous disorders and pseudoschizoid syndrome. Just a month left until the first death in virtuality when an aged man whose destroyer was burned in a space war above the intellectual purple reptiles' planet, died of a heart attack right by the keyboard.

It couldn't scare anyone anymore.

The world have immersed itself.

Deeptown was created by Microsoft and IBM on the Internet.

The main advantage of virtuality was simplicity. It wasn't necessary to draw buildings and palaces, human faces and machines in all detail, just the general outline and several small recognizable hints. The brown wall divided into squares is a brick wall. The blue above is the sky. Blue pants – jeans.

The world submerged and wasn't going to surface back. It was so much more interesting in the deep. Even if it was yet not available to everybody, intellectual elite swore it's allegiance to the new Empire.

To the Deep.

11

It was midnight when I finally cleaned the computer up from the postcard virus and packed the bagged file (in virtuality it'll look like the ordinary diskette now). The head stopped aching and the sleepiness disappeared completely. No Deeptown inhabitant sleeps at night, right?

– Vika, restart, – I commanded.

The thoughtful female face on the screen frowned:

– Really?

– Sure.

The screen dimmed slightly, the image blurred. Then the hard drive started blinking indicating system restart. My machine is just Pentium, not a 'serious' one but I still can't make up my mind to substitute it with a newer computer. It's reliable enough.

– Good evening Lenia, – said Vika, – I'm ready for work.

– Thanks. Connect to Deeptown… use the regular channel.

Modem chirped dialing, I put the helmet on and sat down.

– 28800 connection, the channel is stable, – said Vika.

– Turn the Deep on.

– Done.

Light blue on the screen, flash, then – colorfulness.

How did you manage to create the deep program, Dima? With your shattered mentality, basic knowledge in psychology, and no knowledge in neurophysiology? What helped you?

Now, when you're rich and famous, what are you trying to do? To understand how it dawned upon you or to invent something more amazing? Or just lead your dissolute life and smoke the grass as much as you want? Or wander along Deeptown's streets all around the clock looking at your creation?

I wish I knew that, but – not to be in your shoes, because you're not more than the ordinary virtuality inhabitant, even with all your millions and Octium prototype as a home computer. The Deep holds you as tightly as any provincial programmer from Russian remote who saves money for months just to visit Deeptown once.

You're not the diver, Dima, and this is why I'm happier than you.

… The same room, but there are neon sign flashes and slight noise of moving cars outside.

– Is everything okay Lenia?

I look around.

– Yes. I'll go for a walk, Vika.

I pick up the diskette and put it into my pocket. The portable CD player lies on the shelf among several books and the pile of CDs. I

insert ELO's CD into it, put on headphones, push 'play'. 'Roll over Beethoven' – just what I wanted. Accompanied by the cheerful music I leave the apartment and shut the door.

No bugs this time. Standing on the sidewalk, I raise my hand and stop the cab. This time the driver is an aged man, stout and very intelligent looking.

– Deep-Transit is glad to welcome you Lenia.

I get inside and nod:

– To the 'Three Piglets' restaurant.

This address is well known to the driver. We move fast, a couple of turns and we're before the odd building: partially stone one, partially wooden, partially built of straw mats.

I enter the too familiar restaurant and look around. It is divided into three parts – Eastern cuisine is served in the 'mat' one, European – in the stone one, and Russian

– in the wooden one obviously.

I'm not really hungry; virtual food subjectively satiates, and being in dire straits I usually eat in 'Three piglets', but now I just have to wait for my partner.

I walk directly to the bar, behind which the robust man is standing, taking off the headphones as I walk.

– Hi Andrei.

Sometimes the owner serves his virtual customers himself, but today it's obviously not the case. The bartender smiles but it's just an automatic courtesy:

– Hi! What would you like to drink?

– Gin-Tonic with ice, as usual.

I watch bartender mixing the drink. Tonic is the real Shweppes, Gin is the decent Beefeater. The liquor companies allow to use their trade marks and products' images in virtuality for just a symbolic charge: it's a good advertisement. Pepsi is free at all: it was their marketing trick. Coke costs as much as in reality though.

And it has good sales.

I take the glass and sit by the empty table, watching the guests: it's always interesting.

The number of men and women is approximately the same. Absolutely all women are perfectly beautiful and of all types: from blond Scandinavians to charcoal black Africans. Most men are terrible freaks. No, it's not true of course, just my subconsciousness notes all follies in men's virtual shells – disproportionately muscular figures and too recognizable physiognomies of movie stars glued to body-builders' bodies.

Exception is made for the women though: they all are beautiful.

I take a sip of Gin and lean on the table relaxed: oh it feels

good…

No real bar or restaurant can be compared with the virtual one. They always cook great here. You never have to wait to be served. The huge dose of alcohol won't cause hangover.

But having a real life experience, one really can feel drunk… and subconsciousness dives into the alcohol drug cheerfully. They say that the body's natural narcotics – endorphines start being produced then. True or not, intoxication doesn't disappear instantly when one exits virtuality.

– Sorry, may I please?… – the young girl sits down by my side. Blond hair, clean, slightly dim skin, a simple white suit, a little golden medallion on her neck: most likely, a program of some sort. She's pretty cute and thanks God, not recognizable: either she designed her face by herself or used some rare seen painting as a model or found a cute but not too familiar face in some movie.

– Sure, – I turn to her. The bartender already gives her a glass of wine: 'Emperor', the Chilean one. This girl has a good taste.

– I see you here pretty often, – informs the girl.

DZZZ! the alarm signal in my head.

– Amazing, – I note, – I don't visit this place so often really.

– But I'm here almost always.

Lies.

I can exit virtuality right now and check a couple of dozens of control photos stored in the computer: the visitors of the bar for the last two months. It's always useful to remember new faces. But what for, I know well enough that I never met her before…

– I was wearing different faces, – looks like the girl guesses my thoughts, – while you always wear the same one.

– Changing faces is too expensive, – I begin my self-humiliation, – It's stupid to botch up Schwartzenegger or Stallone from yourself, and I can't afford hiring the image specialist.

– The Deep itself is expensive enough.

She calls virtuality with a Russian term and I like that…

…But not her overall behavior…

I shrug. What a strange talk.

– Excuse me… you're Russian, right? – asks the girl.

I nod. There are lots of Russians in virtuality: nowhere else in the world the computer time usage is controlled as poorly as in our country.

– I'm sorry… – the girl bites her lips slightly, she is obviously excited, – Of course I'm terribly tactless but… What is your name?

I understand.

– Not Dmitry Dibenko. This is what interests you, right?

The girl looks at my face intently and nods, then quickly drains

her glass dry.

– I'm not lying. Honest. – I say softly.

– I believe you, – the girl nods to bartender, then reaches her hand out to me, – I'm Nadya.

I shake her hand and introduce myself:

– Leonid.

So now we know each other and can be less ceremonious. The deep is casual: overly polite tone is offensive here.

The girl casts her hair back from her forehead, the natural and graceful gesture, then gives her glass over to bartender; he refills it quickly. She looks around the hall.

– How do you think, does he really visit virtuality?

– I don't know. Probably. Are you a journalist, Nadya?

– Yes, – she hesitates for a moment, then takes out a business card from her purse and gives it to me, – Here…

The card is complete: not only Email, but also phone number, first and last name. Nadezhda Mesherskaya, the 'Money' magazine, a reporter. Windows-Home is silent, it means that the card is 'clean' – it's really just a card, without any hidden surprises. I put it in my pocket and nod:

– Thanks.

Sorry, it'll be no return courtesy, but it doesn't look like Nadya expects it.

– This deep is a strange thing, – she says sipping her wine, – I'm in Moscow for instance, you are in Samara somewhere, that boy – in Penza…

'That boy', looking like the cute Mexican from a soap opera notices her look and raises his chin proudly. Yes, one can't deny her power of observation, he's really Russian…

– There's a crowd of Americoses, – she goes on without a glimpse of respect, – that weirdo is a Japanese obviously… just look at the eyes he drew for himself. Every nation has it's own complexes… And here are we, playing the fool in nonexistent restaurant, having nonexistent drink, hundreds of computers burn up energy, processors heat up in effort, megabytes of senseless data are pumped over the phone lines back and forth…

– Data is never senseless.

– Yes, maybe, – Nadya glances at me quickly, – Let's better call it not topical one. And what, is this really a new era of the world's technology?

– But what did you expect? The file exchange and discussions of processors' quality? We're humans after all.

Nadya frowns:

– We're people of the new era. Virtuality can change the world,

but we prefer to mask it to fit the old dogmas. Nanotechnology used to imitate a drink is worse than a microscope used as a hammer…

– You're Alexandrian, – I make a guess.

– Yes! – she replies with a slight challenge in her voice.

Alexandrians are the followers of one Petersburg sci-fi writer. They either proclaim the merge of the human with a computer or expect some sort of fantastic blessings from virtuality, I'm not sure.

– What are you doing in this senseless place then? – I ask.

– I'm looking for Dibenko. I want to ask him, did he really imagine it like this? Does he think that what's going on is right?

– I see. But don't you really like this place?

Nadya shrugs.

I stretch my hand and touch her face.

– The warmth of the hand, roughness of wine, coolness of the evening breeze and flowers' scent, splashing of the warm waves and prickly sand under your feet, don't you really like it?

– There's a real life for all that.

– But does it coincide in reality often enough? Here it's enough to just open the door, – I point at the small door in the corner of the 'Japanese' part of the hall, – and all that will be there. Or, didn't you ever wish to stand in the forest clearing in the chilly autumn morning, by the steep river bank drinking hot mulled wine from the round goblet… and with nobody around?…

– The owner of this restaurant must be a romantic person,– says Nadya.

– Of course.

– Leonid, all that you've mentioned is right. But the right place for all these pleasures is in reality.

– Reality is not always affordable.

– Just as virtuality is, Lenia. I don't know where you get money from that allows you to visit here so often, and it's none of my business anyway, but billions of people never were in the deep.

– Millions of people never saw a TV set.

– Virtuality must NOT be an artificial substitution of reality, – says Nadya with conviction.

– Yes, sure. Let's turn the paupers and miserable ones into information storage, let's become impulses in the electronic network…

– Leonid, you know the teaching of Alexandrians through hearsay only. – says Nadya with conviction, – Come visit our Church some time.

I shrug. Possibly I will some time, but there's plenty of interesting places in the deep. The whole lifetime isn't enough to visit all of them.

– I have to go, – Nadya stands and throws a coin at the bar, – I have half an hour more today and should visit a couple more places.

– In search of Dibenko? – I nod, – But maybe it's better to… you know, a warm sand, a Hawaiian beach and some Chilean Red [wine]?

Nadya smiles:

– This won't be work anymore Lenia. The evening beach and the wine… then I'll want continuation. But virtual sex is funny only if you're at home, behind the tightly shut door. I connected from work: six computers in one room and all are occupied. Just imagine how will I look like for my colleagues.

She's absolutely sincere and clever. Good girl, I really hope she's just as open and bright in reality too.

I nod, – Good luck then.

– Thanks, oh mysterious Anonymous, – Nadya bends to me and kisses my cheek.

– Lenia, marker! – whisper the clips on my shoulders.

I take an antivirus handkerchief and wipe the lipstick print from my cheek, wave a finger to Nadya with a warning:

– Girl, I DO prefer to stay mysterious.

Looks like she feels confused, but has enough nerve to shrug and walk away without hurry.

Shit. She spoiled everything, stupid.

It was such a nice talk…

I toss off my glass and snap my fingers to call the bartender:

– Gin-Tonic, fifty-fifty.

Bartender frowns but mixes what was requested. Shit, should I order Tequila with tomato juice, what face will he make, huh?

– Lenia?

I turn around. My Werewolf friend stands nearby: a white suit, patent-leather shoes, a bit old fashioned tie, the face a bit strained.

– Hi Romka { *Roman* }. Have a sit.

– Who's the girl?

– Nothing interesting.

We divers are always paranoid slightly, it can't be helped.

Too many people want to know our real names.

The Werewolf draws in the air noisily and frowns:

– She tried to mark you!

– I know. Don't worry, she's just a journalist.

Romka sits and nods to the bartender who makes terribly ugly face but gives him a full big glass of Absolut-Pepper. It makes me sick to even watch Roman drinking. But he just

makes a wry face, wipes his lips and returns the glass. Maybe he's alcoholic in reality?

I Dunn.

We hide from each other not less than from our enemies. We're too valuable merchandise: a depth fish, freaks shimmering with a

magic glow, any shark dreams to try our taste…

– Did you manage to get the apple out? – asks Roman.

– It's fine, – I fling my jacket open and flop on the shirt's pocket, – the trade article's in place.

The Werewolf relaxes a little.

– What about the buyer?

I check my watch:

– In ten minutes. At the river bank nearby.

– Let's go? – Roman takes his glass.

I scoop mine and we exit the restaurant door that is hacked through the stony wall. In the small lobby I say softly:

– Individual space for us both. Grant access to the person who tells the password 'gray-gray-black'.

The ceiling replies, – Understood.

Now, regardless of how many visitors would like to walk in the virtual space of 'Three Piglets', we'll never see them, only the buyer whom I told the code.

There's a forest behind the second door, the Northern one, primeval and pristine. The cold wind chills to the bone, I huddle up. My companion is absolutely indifferent to the cold. Maybe his helmet is simpler, without air conditioner?

Who knows…

He earns not less than me, but maybe he has a huge family? Or maybe Roman really is alcoholic who squanders grands in just weeks?

There's a small stone hut behind us: this is how the restaurant looks like from this side. We walk along the path slowly, sipping our drinks.

– Do you like pepper vodka? – I ask the Werewolf incidentally.

– Yes.

It's said dryly and without further comments. I wish I knew who you really are, Roman.

But it's impossible: virtuality is cruel to the careless.

We come to the river bank: the steep covered with low thorny bushes. The wind is strong and I narrow my eyes. The sky is covered by dark gray clouds. The river is not exactly mountain one but with rapids and very fast. The flock of some birds can be seen in a distance, I don't know what exactly are they: they never fly closer. The table stands by the steep, there are bottles of Gin, Tonic and Absolut-Pepper on it. Also, a big nickel plated thermos full of mulled wine: a tasty one, with cinnamon, vanilla, pepper, coriander and nutmeg. Three wattled chairs are by the table, we sit and look at the river.

Beautiful.

The white foam on the rocks, the chilly wind, the full goblet in my hand, bluish grey clouds swirling above. It'll be snowing

tomorrow, if 'tomorrow' existed in virtuality.

I take a sip, – I wish I knew where this river was taken from.

– More beautiful place never have I seen in my life… – pronounces the Werewolf in a strange voice.

Oh right, it's like this always. Everybody have their own associations and analogies. Maybe this landscape means something to Roman. For me it's not more than just a nice place.

– Have you been here before?

– In some sense.

Interesting.

– What are those birds, Roman?

– Harpies, – he answers without even looking. Whoops! and his glass is empty again but he doesn't get drunk anyway.

My, how I hate the mystery covering us! We fear each other. We fear everything.

– Well, but the weather is nice… – I toss in randomly.

– Yeah.. snowy is this summer… – says the Werewolf and looks at me with irony. He recognizes this place, it does stir something up in his soul. It's not for me to know what exactly.

I fill the heavy ceramic cup with mulled wine, sniff the aroma. The snowy summer? Who cares! There's nothing better than a lousy weather.

– Lenia, do you smoke grass? – Roman holds me the cigar-case.

– No.

Maybe he really is alcoholic and drug addict…

– They say it's much more harmless than alcohol and tobacco.

– They also say chicken are being milked in Moscow…

Roman hesitates, but lights the cigarette anyway.

Shit. Nadya's arguments don't seem to me so crazy anymore.

I drink my mulled wine, Roman smokes anasha { *marijuana* }. In a couple of minutes he throws unfinished cigarette down with a knock and says:

– Kiddies' fun. Lap me some wine.

– It's a mulled wine.

– What the hell is the difference…

Now we both sip the hot wine with spices. Roman nods:

– Rulez… { *Note: the same word is in Russian original ;-) as well as 'Sux' in part 2 by the way* } I agree. 'Rulez' is something cool: a cold beer, a computer of seventh generation, a beautiful girl, a virus killed successfully… a mulled wine.

We sit by the steep and feel good.

– What was in that apple?

– New cold reliever, a very effective one.

Roman frowns:

– This costs six grands?

– This costs a hundred.

– Ahhh… – Roman's jaw drops.

– Let's wait for the buyer.

The Werewolf nods:

– It's your operation, it's you to decide.

The buyer shows up in some ten minutes, when I start to worry already. I knew him only under a nick 'Hardened', and he knows me as 'Gunslinger'. The buyer is tidy and imperceptible, wearing a regular suit, having hard to remember face: a young guy with a briefcase.

– Good evening, Gunslinger! – the voice is too even: Hardened communicates through the interpreter program.

– Good morning, – I answer looking at my watch. Just a small mutual game, to figure out the diver's time, to determine what time zone he's in is not too little to know already.

– Oh, don't I really love your humor?.. – Hardened sits on the third chair, looks at me questionably, – Have the crop ripened?

– Quite heavy did those apples turn out to be, – I take the diskette out and put it on the table, – To be honest, I would expect these troubles to be more appreciated…

– Didn't we have a deal? Six thousand dollars.

I pull my hands apart:

– According to you, it didn't worth more.

– Do you think otherwise?

– Well… You see Mr Shellerbach…

Hardened shudders.

– … You got mistaken for at least an order. Of course the cold is a trifle.. but who would like to lie flat in bed with high temperature and runny nose, how do you think?

– Not me at least, – Shellerbach The Hardened's face changes. Now he's an aged man with the resolute but nervous face. – But I assumed that the diver's word is piously.

– I don't deny it. I'll give you the file, – with a slight knock I send the diskette across the table, – But next time not a single diver will even move a finger for you. You violate our ethics, Mr Shellerbach. Any job must be paid according to it's complexity.

Shellerbach picks up the diskette ans freezes. I drink mulled wine watching him. The Werewolf is silent: this is my operation.

At last Shellerbach have finished the download and his glance becomes sensible again.

– Well? – I ask.

– Fifty, – says Hardened.

– To each of us?

He is silent, for very-very long time. This is Money, alive, real

money, not taxable, arrived from nowhere and went to nowhere.

– Your account?

I give him a piece of paper, an account number in Switzerland on it.

– Negative interest… you're very careful Mr Diver…

– I have no choice Peter..

He gives up. I know his real name while he doesn't know mine. The bank will never give me away, even if the International Jury states that I'm a man-eater and is guilty of genocide. That's what the negative interest is paid for: for complete safety.

– Fifty to each of you. I make a gesture of a good will, Mr Diver!

– Excellent.

Several seconds – and a hundred of grands flow into my account. This is much, very much! Many years of serene life in virtuality.

– Will you agree for the further cooperation?

I open my checkbook and look at the figure with pleasure, then I write a check for 50000 and give it to the Werewolf.

– It's quite possible.

– What about a permanent contract?

– No.

– What are you afraid of, diver? – there's a curiosity in Shellerbach's gaze.

What am I afraid of, hmm?

– I'm afraid of my name being known. The real freedom is in mystery always.

– I understand, – Shellerbach agrees and looks at Roman askance, – Are you the diver too? Or just a walking virus deposit?

– Diver, – says Roman.

– Well… Good luck gentlemen… – Shellerbach pads a step away, then stops, – Tell me… how is it: to be a diver?

– It's very simple, – replies Roman, – One just needs to know that everything around is just a game, a fantasy.

Shellerbach nods and pulls his hands apart:

– I can't, alas…

He walks away along the path, we watch him leaving. Then I fill our goblets:

– For the luck!

Roman obviously haven't yet understood the scale of what have just happened, he silently looks at the goblet in his hand:

– Tell me Lenia, are you happy?

– Sure.

– Big money… – he examines the check, then raises the goblet quickly,

– For the luck!

– Yeah, for it… – I agree.

– You won't disappear from the deep, will you?

– No.

Roman nods with obvious relief, makes a sip and says:

– You know, it's interesting to work with you. You're… unusual.

For one moment it seems to me that we're approaching that impossible point when divers open to each other.

– Same here, Roma.

The Werewolf stands up, sharply and quickly:

– I gotta go, visitors…

He dissolves in the air, the goblet falls down and rolls away clinking and bouncing.

– Good luck to you too Roman. – I say into the void.

Loneliness is the seamy side of the freedom.

I can't have friends.

– The bill! – I growl into the void angrily, – Now!

The most vexing is that I don't want to sleep at all: it was too lucky day probably.

I return to the restaurant. Some guests have left, some new ones have arrived, an American crowd still laughs at their jokes.

I need a walk.

I leave 'Three Piglets', hesitate for a moment: should I stop the cab?

– then decide to walk. I eventually leave the central streets and approach Russian blocks. In my opinion, this is one of the most interesting places in virtuality, the place where one can just chat.

About anything at all.

I see long rows of buildings, small squares and parks between them, either crowded or empty. I study intricate plates. Some of them are obvious, others are deliberately vague.

'Anecdotes'

'Talks about nothing'

'Sexual adventures'

'Strange place'

'Oats growing!'

'Books'

'Martial arts'

People come here to discuss the certain topics, this is the echo of pre-virtual age. More serious clubs are located further, where one can get an advice on technical questions, to argue about software or even buy pirated programs cheap. All that is of a little interest for me.

I enter the little park with the plate 'Anecdotes' on the gates. This place is always crowded, noisy and messy. This park looks very much like 'People's culture park' of the 60's. The little orchestra is playing in the corner, obviously not a real one, the people are sitting on the benches drinking beer and chatting. I sit a little aside.

The guy dressed in jeans and snow white shirt climbs on the small wooden stage. He's absolutely featureless. The audience glances at him lazily.

– Once Shtirlitz have left his house… – starts the guy.

{ *A side note. Shtirlitz is the main character of very popular Russian 13 episode 1972 TV series about the Soviet spy in Nazi headquarters. The story takes place in February-April 1945. Shtirlitz investigates the attempts of the separate talks held between Allen Dalles and high-ranked Nazis. This series was a real hit then (and still is!), and, as it always happens with something much loved (or hated) in Russia, it gave rise to an enormous amount of anecdotes, mostly hilariously stupid or one-liners based on*

'game of words' } The girl nearby whistles loudly and throws a beer bottle at the guy. I understand her perfectly: 90% of all anecdotes told here is an ancient junk. This club is most loved by the newbies in virtuality… who don't yet realize the little fact that there's nothing new under the sky. One have to spend not more than half an hour here to believe: Cain killed Abel only for the latter's love to tell the old { *'long bearded'* } anecdotes…

Despite the whistles and shouts the guy finishes telling his anecdote and runs from the stage looking around in a primed way. Lonely applause can be heard: geez, who could imagine… I look around for the bar, it's in the far corner of the park. The girl gives me a bottle of beer without a word.

– Thanks.. – I make a sip. The ice cold 'Heineken' raises my spirits instantly.

One more guy ascends the stage, this time much more individual looking one, reminding me the Baltic type. His face looks roguish and I prick up my ears. The guy glances at the small booth in the corner of the stage askance.

– Gentlemen! – he shouts. Hm, he's really Baltic unless it was my subconsciousness that made me hear the accent. – 'Lithocomp' company is honored to offer you the lowest prices for the following…

A-haaa… no questions.

I look at the booth too: the moderator's hiding place. Every club has the person who watches the talks to correspond to the declared topic. The question is though: is moderator on duty now or will react later?

He's here.

The booth's door opens and the sturdy man emerges from inside lazily, holding the pretty sinister looking device in his hands. The Baltic guy notices him and starts chattering really fast: – … hard drives: 'Quantum Lighting', 'Western Digital'…

– Not on topic! – the moderator says lazily but with suppressed rage and shoulders his weapon. The audience goes quiet enjoying the show.

The barrel recoils and the brightly shining red cross-like object flies towards the merchant with a shrilling whistle. The Baltic tries to duck but no use: moderators never miss. The fiery cross or 'plus' as it's usually called, sticks to the merchant's shirt: three such 'pluses' in total – and he'll be banned from 'Anecdotes' club forever.

The crowd laughs approvingly.

– Hey, maybe it was the way the anecdote was supposed to begin, huh? – shouts somebody out from the audience. The moderator shakes his finger to him with a warning, then aims at the Baltic again. The guy quits his attempts to scrape the shiny plus off his shirt, jumps

down from the stage and flees.

– Wheee, crush 'im! – the crowd instigates the moderator but he's in the kind mood today, he flings the plus-thrower behind his back and retires into the portable toilet-looking booth.

– 'Lithocomp'… – says the girl nearby thoughtfully. – I should check their prices, it's time to change the HD…

Well, at least some success was achieved by the merchant after all. Another humor thirsty one ascends the stage.

– Once, Winnie the Pooh and Piglet…. { *yet another mega popular anecdote characters, taken NOT from Disney movies though, but from Russian animated series produced in70's, FAR cooler one than Disney's IMHO* } I start feeling myself bored to death.

Just why Shtirlitz and Pooh anecdotes are so popular in virtuality?! Is it some weird kind of psychologic aberration?…

– Thanks for the beer, – I say to the girl and walk out of the park.

My mood can't be called lousy, but it's odd. I toil myself along the clubs' buildings. Through the barred windows of the Martial Arts club I can see the fragile built Eastern looking guy demonstrating some complicated moves. In the open air type cinema called 'Movies' the imposing man gestures energetically standing before the screen. I peek inside and hear:

– Cheap stuff! This movie is a disgusting cheap stuff!

Boring-boring-boring, Ladies and Gentlemen…

Alexandrians are probably right: we have turned the virtual world into the parody of the real one, but parodies are never better than the original, their goal is different: to mock it, to show its awkwardness and stupidity.

But we can't change the world, and this parody makes no sense. It's not a dash forward but just a step aside.

– Vika…

– Yes Lenia?

– Stop me a cab…

– Okay.

Maybe it's worthy to ride around the city, or to go to an entertainment center.

The Deep-Transit's cab stops by me, I open the door and get inside. The driver is of some absolutely new type, never seen before: the bearded man in ripped T-shirt and tattoos on his shoulders. Does he imitate Punk or something?

– The car will arrive shortly, – informs Windows-Home.

Now I realize that the driver haven't even told the traditional greeting; that we're moving already even if I haven't told the address.

– It's only one road from here, – says the driver and turns to me with a smirk. He has a scar on his cheek and decayed teeth. It's not a

program obviously, it's a real person.

– Stop the car.

– That's against the rules, – the driver grins steering carelessly.

{ *The whole scene hints to another Russian hit movie called "The Diamond Hand", released in 1968. It's a great comedy about a modest aged Soviet engineer who went to the sea cruise abroad for the first time and was confused (and misplaced) with a jewelry smugglers' courier.* } Uh-oh.

– Vika, exit! – I command.

No answer.

– Your little program doesn't hear you, – informs the driver, – Stay put, okie? It'll be the best.

I never heard about virtual abductions before.

– Who are you?

The Beard just smiles.

Of course there is a way out: unavailable to the ordinary Deeptown citizen: to exit the Deep by myself and to break the connection.

The question is though: isn't it exactly what they expect from me? Revealing myself as the diver, and to break the connection while I'm in the 'car', the transportation program which is probably capable of tracing the telephone line?

Geez, just why did I connect from the main address today, now it's an amateur's task to determine my personality!

– What do you want?

The driver ignores me, but watches nevertheless, examining me with curiosity of the hunter who managed to shoot the firebird.

– Okay, you have asked for this, – I say trying not to panic and take the revolver out.

Six bullets – six different viruses. It's a weak weapon but I rely on the variety of loads, maybe the kidnapper's protection won't stand it.

Three bullets just go through him without 'seeing' the target. Good antivirus, prevented the detection of its computer. One bullet flattens and falls on the floor: the virus is killed. Other two shells don't fire at all: viruses are neutralized right in the barrel.

That's all.

I hit the driver with the revolver's handle, also the weak virus that knocks out the simple programs like Deep-Transit well, but now there's no effect of course.

– Don't flutter, – advises the driver watching how I pull the door locks. Everything is sealed completely and I submit myself. At any rate, no information is unnecessary.

We move on, and again I try to contact Vika – without any success. My voice communication channel is blocked.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours…

The car's interior is on the helmet's screens. Wow, drawn great: this is well recognizable sporty 'Lancia'.

I laid my hands on the keyboard, typed in several commands, pressed Enter.

It worked.

deep Enter I'm in the car again. The driver looks back at me cautiously. I spin the revolver in my hand thoughtfully: it's loaded again, and the pocket is weighed down by a grenade.

– The parcel was received? – asks the driver.

Now it's my turn to play the game of silence.

– I wonder how?

– You know my friend, if I run out of ammo, it's the definite order to refill my supplies. – Smugness of a petty hacker is in my voice. Quite plausible legend: the fact that my computer have loaded the new portion of viruses into my revolver doesn't reveal the diver in me.

The driver thinks for a while.

– Let's delay shooting a little, okay?

I shrug indefinitely. The Beard says soothingly:

– We've arrived.

The car really stops by the unfamiliar building: the gray cube without windows, with the only door, very wide like in the garage and heavily armored as if in warning – it'll be tough to enter uninvited. Usually these buildings hide either banal consumer goods warehouses or luxury apartments inside.

– Let's go? – suggests the driver.

I keep silence.

The Beard hits accelerator without a word and the car jumps directly to the door. In a moment before the impact the door flies open letting us in.

It's really a warehouse.

Lots of shelves along the walls, boxes with colorful labels of famous manufacturers. Tons of good merchandise. This place is either an office of the big dealer or the thieves' hiding, which seems to be more likely.

The doors are unblocked already, now the car's function is performed by the walls of this building. I still have no connection to Vika.

– So? – I ask getting out of 'Lancia', – What the hell do you want?

The driver looks past me. It's stupid, but I turn around.

The man without face stands in the corner of the warehouse.

A black cloak length to the floor, a silver clip in the form of the rose on his chest, curling hair of some odd ash color but pretty natural looking but instead of his face – a gray haze like condensed fog. Such

tricks are forbidden in the city but one can do that at home, but what for? If one wants not to be recognizable, it's possible to pick the standard face from Windows-Home set: it's the hell of those there, while the missing face with such unusual dress is just stupid. But looks impressive nevertheless.

– Semen, leave us, – says Man Without Face.

The driver nods, turns around and leaves somewhere into the shelves labyrinth. His steps fade slowly and I note that the echo is excellent here, maybe to make it impossible to move around unnoticed.

– You are the diver, – says Man Without Face.

Oh sure. Today's tradition: somebody tries to catch me again, for the third time already. God loves the Trinity…

– Maybe. And you're Bill Gates possibly. – I reply.

Even if he smiles, I can't see it for sure.

– Possibly.

Yeah right. The owner of Microsoft in pursue of divers along the Net. Firstly, he makes money by more traditional means, secondly he doesn't speak Russian himself. But… who knows how perfect interpreter programs might be? Emotionless tones is the tradeoff of serial made and cheap ones.

– Let's not play the fool, – I say. – You decided that I'm the diver? And dragged me here for interrogation. I'm afraid you'll be disappointed.

– This morning two hackers, one of those being the obvious diver, stole the file with the technology of the new pharmaceutical product from Al-Kabar. – Man Without Face is patient and strict, – I have no idea how much did they promise to pay you for that, but luckily Mr Friedrich Urman had informed the diver that the real price would be a hundred thousand. Some psychological assumptions follow: like the one that the diver will get rid of the hot file immediately. Like he'll demand exactly a hundred grands from the buyer. Like he'll transfer the money to the very secure account.

No, that can't be… real professionals are working in banks. Nobody could trace me.

– Let's assume also that two hackers divide the amount equally. And now it becomes really interesting, my friend. Money transfers happen every second in Deeptown, but the transfer of exactly 50 000… from one private party to another… The account numbers stay secret, but the place where the payment took place is much more easily determined. Do you follow my thought?

That's it. Very simple.

I was traced from the very 'Three Piglets'. Roman had left instantly, while I decided to walk a little.

To find an adventure for my stupid ass.

Why the hell did I share equally with him?!

– Very interesting story. How does it relate to me I wonder?

Even if my interlocutor has no face I know for sure he's smiling.

– One has to lose with honor, Mr Diver.

I haven't lost yet, but he doesn't know that.

– Sure, impossibility of being caught is what makes divers what they are. – says Man Without Face, – What are the program obstacles for you? All you need to do is just to concentrate… and off you are, back home… to disconnect manually.

Um-hm. Thanks for the tip. It'll be the moment of connection being closed when I'll be traced…

– In 24 hours, when the safety timer snaps into action on my computer,

– I shout, – your perfect idea will crumble and you'll be sorry of your stupidity! I'm an honest guy, I pay the taxes! I'll stir up all the Deeptown police!

– Maybe, but unlikely, – says Man Without Face, – Well, if we are convinced that you're the honest hacker, – the great amount of sarcasm is in his last words, – then we'll have no grudges against you.

– You'll be caught! – I threaten him, – And then – excommunication forever!

Excommunication is the most dreadful threat for any Deeptown citizen: it's too hard to live without virtuality if one visited it even just once.

– I don't think it'll happen.

The man without face throws his cloak open with an experienced stripper gesture. There's a rainbow disk on the inside: a swirling glowing spiral surrounded by blue.

Oh my. He's from the police himself. At least commissar if he has a rainbow badge.

– Oh great, go ahead… – I say in a cheerless voice, – I knew that all cops are ass holes, but not to this extent..

– Just listen to me for the start.

– What else is left for me to do? – I shout, – What?!

I pull out the revolver and thrust all six bullets into the door. Six ricochets. The boxes with software on the shelves start to blow up and burn. The sprinkles on the ceiling come to life with a hissing sound and viruses get terminated in a second.

– Stop being hysterical, – says Man Without Face, it seems to me that there's a slight

doubt in his voice. I throw my revolver at him, it comes through and falls down under the wall.

– Do you want me to calm you down?

His voice is ice cold and doesn't promise anything good.

I sit down on the floor, squeeze my head with hands and whisper:

– Assholes… Fucking assholes..

– We don't care about your pranks in the Deep, diver. The theft is bad, but it was high time for Urman to get knocked on the nose.

I'm whining quietly, rocking from side to side.

Man Without Face ignores my performance.

– The crime always existed, it exists now and will exist. I'm not Jesus and I don't pretend to complete innocence myself. I have my own goals.

– And I have my little legal business! What do you want?

– That's better. Mr Diver, have you heard about the Lost Point? Or about the Invisible Boss?

What I was expecting the least were the ancient fables.

– 'Point' is the old term for the terminal network user?

– Yes, the user of Fidonet… this one existed some time ago.

– Maybe I've heard about that… Is it about the guy who was killed by electric shock being in virtuality? And his consciousness somehow stayed alive in the Net?

– Yes. The youth with a pale face and burned clothes who asks everybody whom he meets to report to the 13th Moscow hub that the point 666 was lost… And about the Invisible Boss?

– Give me the chair, – I rise from the cold concrete floor.

– Follow me.

We go to the right, behind the shelf with Mac software. Illiquid stuff, only a few people now use these computers. There were humans and Neanderthals, then IBM and Apple. Stub evolution branches aren't viable. The small table piled with papers is behind the shelves, two chairs by it. We sit down.

– Invisible Boss is the tale of the same times. – says Man Without Face. – Boss was the higher step in Fidonet hierarchy. It was boss to whom those who wanted to become points and join to virtuality addressed their requests to… There was no virtuality back then though… The legend told that sometimes the newbies managed to find a very good boss for themselves, who provided the network access at any time, high transfer rate, connection to any club… those were called echo-conferences at that time.

I nod automatically.

– And everything was fine usually, – looks like Man Without Face haven't noticed my negligence, – until one of the points found out that the phone number that he used to communicate with his boss doesn't exist, and the boss himself was not seen or heard about by anybody. After that Invisible Boss used to send the letter to all his point saying, "Why do you pursue me?" and disappear.

– Undoubtedly rich the folklore was, – I agree. – I also remember about the crazy moderator, and the echo-conference called 'Die here!'

– I started with Fidonet as well, – says Man Without Face.

I stay silent.

– Mr Diver, unlike Urman I'm not trying to ascertain your personality. But you know what the funniest thing is? We both need you for the same purpose.

– To capture the Lost Point?

Man Without Face laughs softly.

– This is just a fable… that was born in the junction of times when Internet and Fidonet turned into the united virtuality. Very few people remember them now. Just five years have passed, and look how much was forgotten.

– Nothing was forgotten, it's buried under newer information, but is still alive.

– All the same diver, the essence doesn't change.

– Well, but today the new legend was born.

– Which one?

– About Man Without Face.

My interlocutor shakes his head.

– Hardly will it be so intriguing as the youth dressed in smoking clothes…

We both laugh quietly.

– So Mr Diver… have you ever played in the 'Labyrinth of Death'?

– Possibly.

– Do you know that two divers cooperate with them?

– I can assume that.

Even two? I was sure that 'Labyrinth' manages with only one rescuer..

– I can give you their addresses… either network or the real ones.

Wow!!!

– One of them is Ukranian, the other one is Canadian. The first one lives…

– No, – I say with some effort.

– How interesting! I was sure that it's the common dream to determine the diver's personality! Including the divers themselves!

– This dream is one of the worst and base crimes… according to our code.

For the first time I admit that I'm diver. Hardly my interlocutor had any doubt about that though.

– One problem have arose in "Labyrinth"… and those two can't manage it… – Man Without Face bends across the table, takes a piece of paper and writes the short address. He does right that doesn't try to give me the business card, I'd never take a file from him. – These are

my coordinates. After you visit "Labyrinth", offer your service to the management and try to solve the problem, contact me. Ask for… Man Without Face.

He doesn't want to make it clearer and as it seems he doesn't have even a little doubt that I'll rush to "Labyrinth" at once.

– Why would I want to do that?

Man Without Face takes a small badge from the cloak pocket. It looks pretty like the police badge but its background is white and there's not a spiral in the center but a tiny sphere woven of the thinnest threads.

– That's why.

The badge is on the table between us. I look at it but don't dare to touch.

What if it disappears?

When Lady Winter received the order from Cardinal Richelieu (SP???) saying "Whatever is done by this person was done for the benefit of France", it was a bit less cool.

The legendary Complete Licence Medal is before me: the right for just anything that's possible to do in the deep.

Friedrich Urman would open the door and escort me to the bridge personally if he saw this badge.

He probably would hire killers later though in order to settle the scores with me but in the deep he would be extremely polite.

I've never seen the Medal with my own eyes before. I know that Dmitry Dibenko received the same one in his time: for the creation of the deep itself.

One must accomplish something vitally important for all virtual space for any of his actions to be considered right from now on.

– It will wait for you on this table, – says Man Without Face, – You'll get it… in case of your success.

I nod silently.

– Note that there'll be other aspirants, – informs Man Without Face, – We're looking for divers everywhere in the deep, and will find many, and will tell them the same I've told you.

– What's there, in "Labyrinth"? – I ask turning my gaze away from the Medal.

– I have no idea. This is what worries me.

I allow myself to smirk, tell me that you don't know…

– Until now everything that was happening in virtuality had their analogies in the real world. Entertainment, business, science, communications…

Interesting that he ranked entertainment first…

– Now something have changed…. Good luck to you diver. You can go now.

Man Without Face nods in the direction of the door.

– I'll leave by my own way.

– You decided to reveal yourself?

– Sure not.

At parting, I look in the foggy oval of his face.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours…

I took off the helmet and stretched my hand to the modem hesitatingly, then pulled the phone wire from the jack.

– The line is broke! – informs Vika

– I know, girl.

That's it, mysterious anonymous. It's that simple. Not a standard exit which is possible to trace but an instantly broken thread.

It's barbaric of course, but absolutely no data exchange between my computer and the one where the warehouse is modeled.

– No dialtone, – says Vika, – Check the wiring.

– Shut down.

– Really?

– Yes.

The blue background with the white falling figure fills the screen.

– Now it's safe to turn off your computer, – whispers Vika sleepily.

Good night to you, the most loyal of my friends… I turned the power switch and turned off the modem. I need a quiet night, let all mail wait until the morning. It's already 3:30 am though… the sky becomes lighter.

And I want to sleep so much! The head is aching of excess information.

I pulled off the virtual suit. Man, does it stink of sweat, it requires cleaning for a long time by now… Then I plopped down on the sofa. Good that I didn't do the bed yesterday. How farsighted have I become…

For three years already, I suppose.

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It was a quarter before one when I woke up. The TV set that turned on at 10 was muttering quietly. Unpowered computer was reproachfully silent on the table.

– Oh it feels good… – I whispered into the ceiling.

I need to change the apartment, to buy the normal one-bedroom in the downtown, in a good brick house, with the view to the Neva river… not in this proletarian district, rotten and blown through by all winds.

Then we'll move Vika into new 'apartments': I'll buy the new 'Septium' brand name, with preloaded licensed software, with a couple of hundreds Megs of RAM… with the 1000 Terabyte holographic HD, cordless modem and super-sensitive Siemens microphone… with a color printer, Dunn what for, but let it be, a decent scanner instead of the manual piece of shit, a dedicated phone line… Geez, even 50 grands isn't enough!

On the other hand… why would I need two rooms in the apartment? Even here the kitchen is empty anyway: I moved the fridge and microwave into the room long time ago, and it's closer to get the water in the bathroom.

Okay, this is decided: let's celebrate the move for Vika. It'll not be a shame to invite friends then.

I rose, padded to the fridge and took out a can of beer. I don't drink before noon usually, but it's almost 1PM already. What a good time I woke up at!

The light 'Schultheiss' seemed almost strong in the morning. It's over, good bye 'Amsterdam-Navigator' and 'Bavaria-86', the good friends of poor hackers. From now on – only 'Guinness', 'Heineken', 'Kilkenny'… and instead of Belgian boiled sausage the decent Moscow 'servelat' { *raw-smoked hard sausage* } and a real ham. And also… well, I'll buy the coffee maker. Down with instant coffee!

When for the first time in two days I started to shave and cut myself quite tangibly, New Russian's fantasy suggested me to get 'Shick-Protector' also. Nothing else could come into my mind after that, just some messy ideas about the second phone line and second modem – in order for Vika to be able to download mail and do some other simple tasks while I'm traveling in the deep.

It's a bit far too much though. Even Maniac doesn't have second phone line.

By the way, I owe him beer, it looks very much like he saved my life yesterday.

And it's better not to procrastinate with it: I've got the suspicion

that I'll be able to treat him with nothing more than just 'Navigator' in a week… well, quite a beer too, a strong one, with original taste…

I turned the computer on, connected to the Internet and transferred $5000 to my St. Petersburg account without any virtuality, just in 10 minutes. Then I checked my wardrobe, chose the decently fresh shirt and old but clean jeans, put my passport and Visa card in the pocket. What else? Ah yes… the beer.

The shabby 5 liter canister was standing sadly on the balcony. I unscrewed the cap and sniffed inside: it smelled of soured 'Zhigulevskoe' { *classic Russian beer ;-)* }. I had to wash the canister in cold water, then in hot one, then in cold again. Then I've put it into the bag that stayed here from previous apartment owners (I never have time to get rid of garbage) and walked out.

My, how much cleaner and neater my staircase in virtuality is! And unlike here, no eternal smell of flooded basement and stray cats!

Having left the side streets I stopped by the road and raised my hand; I had to stand like that for quite a time. Finally one junky 'Lada' condescended to stop.

– To the 'Kredo-Bank', – I said.

As strange as it seems, the driver knew the way.

In around 20 minutes, parted with the remains of my cash I was entering the palace of hidden and evident capitals under glassy stares of security guards.. In 20 minutes more, filled with various checkups, numerous phone calls to the bank's main office and requests to specify the account number, the bank clerks became kinder and finally gave me out $1000. In rouble equivalent of course.

And in quarter of an hour more I entered the Irish pub 'Molly' on 36 Rubinstein Street. It's not too crowded in the daytime and this helped me. The Big Mugs { *security guards ;-)* } by the entrance were relaxed and just froze dumb when they saw my canister. I passed the cloak room solemnly and entered the neat twilight of semi-basement, approached the bar and smiled to the bartender.

Luckily, bartender in 'Molly' is British. Whatever one can say, but they are far superior than we are in some aspects. He smiled and gazed at me questionably.

– Good afternoon, Christian, – I said. – May I ask for 5 liters of beer?

He definitely wasn't used to sell the beer by liters. But it took him only five seconds to regain his smile.

– Which beer?

– 'Zhigulevskoye'.

The guards behind my back who for some reason decided to visit the hall together with me, started to breathe heavily.

– Just kidding, – I explained, – 'Guinness' of course, – And I gave

the canister to Christian.

Self control seems to be one of the most important qualities of the best European bartenders, and Christian is one of them. He picked the canister up casually, weighted it in his hand as if to estimate it's volume and started to fill it from the sparkling faucet.

Big Mugs behind me were silently going crazy, and it amused me lots.

– Please wait for the foam to settle, – said Christian with a strong accent putting the canister on the bar. Wow, what a cool guy! I visit 'Molly' pretty seldom and never noticed him to be so proficient.

– Okay, then one more mug to drink here please, – I said and turned around.

Big Mugs pretended to study the bottle rows behind Christian's back. Okay. Until they are sure in my paying capacity, I won't be able to drink my beer in peace.

I dragged out a pile of small notes from the right pocket of my jeans and started to examine it. The guards' breathing became faster again.

Shit, do I really look that lousy?!

A thick pack of hundred thousand rouble notes emerged from the left pocket. I put three notes on the bar, took the mug and turned around.

Have anybody really stood here? No, looks like I was imagining things…

Having seated by the nearest table I silently enjoyed the best beer invented in this sinful world. Then I took my canister from the merry bartender (Europe! One can't affect him so easily), and after short hesitation took the change too. He'll do without it: the beer isn't cheap itself.

It's no difference in the Deep though: either 'Bavaria' in cans or 'Guinness' from the

barrel, the cost is the same. Now I managed to stop the car much quicker, or it was just the time running faster? I jumped into the rattling 'Volga' and shouted cheerfully:

– Whip it up to Maniac!

A pair of very big and round eyes gazed at me.

– Get out, – said the driver in the same brief manner.

When stopping the next volunteer to earn easy money I kept reminding myself that I'm not in virtuality where patient Vika will turn the simple voice command into understandable address.

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Maniac lives on Vasilievsky [Island] {a district of St.Petersburg }. Panting, I climbed to the fifth floor: at the time this house was built, elevators were yet a novelty, and rang at the door. One, two, three… pause.. one, two. Even if Maniac is in the Deep, the computer connected to all apartment wiring will submit to the code ring at the door and eject Maniac from virtuality.

The steps sounded in the depth of the apartment, I closed the peephole with a finger quickly.

– Who? – asked Maniac gloomily.

– Racket requested?

Pause. Obviously Maniac is just from the deep and has a little mood for humor.

– Who?!

– Shit, it's me, me! – I removed the finger.

Maniac rattled with locks opening the door.. I entered. He was dressed in virtual suit right on the naked body, with a shotgun in his hand. The gun was huge, with it the slim and narrow shouldered hacker looked like a kid playing war game.

– Wow, – I just said.

– Yeah… I was fumbling in one guy's comp… hardly managed to get my ass outta there. – Maniac was brief, he locked the door, glanced at the canister and asked sympathetically, – Dire straits again?

– No, not really.

– I have a couple of bottles of 'Baltic'…

– I's 'Guinness' here, – I declared proudly. Maniac looked at the canister thoughtfully and hurled:

– You pervert…

I followed him to the small neat kitchen and asked cautiously:

– Where's… yours…?

– With her folks.

– Quarreled again?

– Why quarreled? – said Maniac indignantly, – Does the wife's not being at home immediately mean that we quarreled? She have just… decided to visit Mommy… well okay, we have quarreled a little..

– Why so?

– Ah… I've passed the red light…

I nodded: it's very difficult to live in the deep and be married. What the hell betrayal is in visiting the virtual brothel? It's all unreal there!

But Maniac's spouse got hurt anyway…

We sat by the table, Maniac searched the fridge, got the pack of

franks, a piece of cheese, then brought two huge clay glasses from his room. I filled them with beer solemnly.

– Gee, it's really 'Guinness'… – admitted Maniac drawing the letter 'M' on the thick foam.

– For the Love, Shurka.

– Um-gm… – Maniac said gloomily and drained his glass, – Yeah. Love. Shit, the devil tempted me! I had to flee… a couple of lamers was on my tail… So I decided to visit 'Strawberry Fields'…

– What the hell for?

– Don't you really know what security systems those brothels have? – Maniac was surprised, – This is where senators, Duma deputies, businessmen … other money sacks always are. Security will cut you off from your pursuers at once!

I shook my head, didn't know that. It's a shame to confess but I never visited those 'establishments' before.

– So well… I decided to wait for half an hour, – went Maniac on with his story, – But you wouldn't just hang there alone like stupid, right? So I called for one girl… we were just sitting, drinking beer… 'Guinness'! – confessed Maniac in a sudden frank manner, – Well, and… somehow it happened… and in the very interesting moment – THWAP! a hit on my mug! The girl kisses me but I feel freaking pain… and then… unprogrammed exit from the deep… Gal'ka ripped the helmet out of the port..

He poured himself more beer. I nodded sympathetically: unprogrammed exit is a very unpleasant thing.

For not-diver, that is.

– It'll be fine, – I said, – Not for the first time, not for the last one either…

– She said, it WAS the last time, – informed Maniac gloomily. – I haven't visited these brothels for a year! My suit is even without sex stimulator!

– Well, mine's with it, – I said, – I just never visit these.

– Too bad for you. Have your fun while young.

In fact, Maniac is two years younger than me but he's a cool hacker while I'm just an ordinary 'newbie', and also he's married, and for the second time.

– Okay, relax. You'll make peace tomorrow.

– We will, – agreed Maniac, – So at least today I'll have to have the most fun possible…

We exchanged understanding smiles and sipped more beer.

– Buy the woman's suit for Gal'ka, – I suggested, – Drag her into the Abyss… and no problem! { *same in Russian original* }

– Yeah, thanks a lot…– growled Maniac with evident caution in his voice, – Have you ever seen the women who have tried the virtual

sex? Their psyche is… different. No normal male will ever satisfy them!

I nodded, even if I couldn't really imagine women went crazy about virtual sex. I could imagine the men though, many got crazy over that, that's why I didn't hurry to try it. Experiments with adventure thirsty girls is one thing, but the professionals from virtual brothels is a very different case.

– For the health, – I offered.

We drank and filled the glasses for the third time. The canister was halved and we felt much better.

– For the hub 5-0-83,207… – said Maniac, – For old good 'Fido'…

We drank in silence and without touching glasses, like we would for the dead.

– Everything changes, Shurka, – I said quietly. – It was a 'network of friends', the chat about just anything, envy at the Internet, profanity towards Microsoft. But now there's neither Internet nor Fidonet, only virtuality, and Windoze is the best program for it.

– They're hack-workers, – proclaimed Maniac stubbornly, – You what, still use Windows-Home?

– Yep.

– Maybe you're right, – sighed Maniac drearily, – A pleasant voice, advices about amount of 'brains' and hardware quality… Pah!. No need to think at all, just drag the arrow along the screen and gaze at the piccies.

– And what about you? Still fooling with 'poluos' '? { *OS/2: 'half-os'* }

– Why 'fooling'?!, – said Maniac with indignation, – It's the best OS if not to count UNIX! I've installed the new version 2 days ago, it rocks!

– I hear this every time I visit you, – I said, – "Have installed… new version… fucked up my brains for three days until managed to tune it up…" While I have Windows-Home for two years already.

– Everybody gets what suits them best… – admitted Maniac, and asked suddenly, – Hey Lenia, how did you manage to burglarize Al-Kabar using Windoze by the way?

I looked aside.

– There were rumors on the Net that two divers have swindled Al-Kabar,

– said Maniac insinuatingly.

I made the last attempt to deviate:

– Why two? One diver and one…. assistant.

Maniac laughed softly:

– Don't consider me a lamer Lenia, otherwise you'll receive such a nice 'hello' in the mail that you'll have to reinstall whole freakin' HD

from scratch… Divers never pick an ordinary guys to assist them.

I kept silence looking at Maniac.

– I see, – he said. – Well, for the luck. For the rich fools and smart hackers.

We touched the glasses.

– What was there Len'ka?

– Runny nose reliever.

– Really? Cool…

We chewed a couple franks each and I was drearily thinking that my anonymity was broken after all. Yesterday there were three attempts to catch me.

Today I was just 'calculated'.

– Lenia, I don't know a single diver personally, – said Maniac, – And I ain't gonna hunt for them. I don't have any complexes… especially towards my friends.

– Thanks, – I said.

– But you know… Just one question.

Sure, any hacker always has just one question. They think that it's possible to ask something after which all divers' mysteries become clear.

– Well?

-What does the diver do when he decides to exit virtuality, just thinks like 'I want to return to reality' or what?

– I heard that one diver… – I looked aside, – Mutters the stupid rhyme.

– Which one?

– Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours.

– And that's it?

– Sometimes he adds: "Abyss, let me go."

– And that's it? – asked Maniac dolefully.

– Yes.

– My, how simple…

Maniac searched in his pockets, took out the pack of 'Lucky Strike', lit the cigarette, then said with a slight resentment:

– It was so much simpler before. There are hackers, honest 'newbies' and lamers. The first ones can do everything, the second ones are learning. The third ones are stupid, it's not a sin to scoff at them. Just look at yourself: as you were a 'newbie' always, you're still the one.

I agreed.

– But then the deep emerged… it seemed that all our dreams come true.

– Maniac laughed bitterly – But in reality-hell no! I, the cool hacker, – he declared with a challenge, – am just one of the millions in

the Abyss… well, just a little smarter possibly, I have some experience after all. But sometimes… such shit happens anyway…

He kept silence for some time, twiddling the frank in his hands, then informed:

– I ate a mouse a couple of days ago.

– What?!

– A computer mouse.. Well, not the mouse itself, it's too hard… just bit off the wire.

– Why? – I asked numbly.

– It was an accident… I was in the deep.. We were sitting in "Rainbow" with some guys, drinking beer with smoked fish… Well, I ran out of fish and took some from Max's plate..

– But Max doesn't drink beer!

– He drank 'Fiesta'. { *orange soda* }

– 'Fiesta'?! With smoked fish?

– Well, just for a company.. – Maniac sighed, – And well, possibly it was too far to get to his plate, so… looks like I jerked a bit in reality. When I exited – gee, the mouse's wire is bitten off! And, like… some wire is missing…

– Does your stomach ache?

– No, nothing so far…

We filled our glasses.

– Or this, – Maniac went on, – Do you know "Labyrinth of Death"?

– Yes, – I sobered up in an instant.

– I decided to have some fun not long ago, and entered the 17th level directly. They added so many stuff there recently! It's a nightmare of a game… well, in brief, I was stuck.

– What do you mean?

– I couldn't pass to the next level, but without passing it the exit menu doesn't pop up.

– And?…

– And I was sitting there for thirty-six hours, – said Maniac with rage, – The whole company of us idiots gathered there. We were shot dead at least ten times each, then we just blocked ourselves out in some basement, sang the songs, firing back at the monsters… until our timers went up.

– You have thirty-six hours limit of continuous being in the deep?

– Twenty-four now.

– What about Gal'ka?

– Ah, she was… at mother-in-law's place… Len'ka, what time limit do you have?

– I removed the limit, – I confessed.

– I see… diver… – Shurka laughed forcefully. – Shit, I never completely believed in you, even if suspected.

– Whom, me?

– Sure. Why the hell would the 'newbie' need battle viruses and antidotes?

I feel a little sad. Something have changed in our relations, and too sharply. Maybe it'll pass in some time…

– Shurka, I can't do anything – except to exit virtuality, any program for me is just a heap of senseless symbols and a launching file.

Maniac nodded.

– I understand. But just tell me, would you like to change places with me? What is more interesting: to create the deep or to rule it?

I'm silent.

– Pour me some beer, – sighed Maniac.

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I was at Maniac's place until late night, 'Guinness' was followed by 'Baltic #6', and for the dessert Shurka dug out the Christmas 'Kronenburg'. Neither Irish nor Petersburg nor French beer failed.

In the depth of my soul I was glad that I had opened to somebody. My hacker friends are divided into two groups: the first one keeps secrets until after the first bottle of beer, the other one kinda forgets all secrets by that point. Shurka belongs to the second one.

At least now he'll know what for do I need all this various virus soft which I drag out of him by all cunning means.

– How much simpler would it be if the deep wouldn't be so strong of an addiction, – I was thinking in the cab on my way home. – How much more right and simple… There wouldn't be a division into the lucky and the unfortunate ones which can't be overcome. There wouldn't be that ridiculous situation: excellent programmers not being able to cross the border between reality and illusion, and clumsy guys like myself who don't even notice this barrier.

There wouldn't ever be envy to each other and eternal hunt.

But is it my fault? I don't know why it happens myself, what flaw of consciousness makes one a diver, and it is of course a flaw since we are such a minority. It'd be stupid not to use this ability but too dreadful to offer it for everyone's study.

That's how it goes: somebody can do long jumps of eight meters, somebody writes poems, somebody is not dependent on virtuality. But why, why it's so few of us, so few that one should count not even in percent but by person?

– Here? – asked the driver.

– Yes, thanks.

I paid him, got out of the car and went towards my house feeling inflated like a balloon. Now I have to either fall asleep submitting myself to the morning hangover or to submerge into the deep: it cures hangover well.

On the second floor of the staircase where the light is on always for some reason, five teens were sitting, playing cards right on the floor, talking about something in dimmed voices… No, not talking, it'd be better to say growling to each other. I knew two of them, other three were unfamiliar. A little pack of smaller carnivores. They'd eagerly rip the loner apart in a dark corner but here I'm safe: carnivores don't hunt near their den.

– Hi, – said the guy who lives in the apartment above mine, in the same type of studio, together with his parents and older sister who

often comes back only by the morning. Walls and ceilings in this house are thin enough for me to be well posted on all their troubles and quarrels.

– Hi, – I said.

– Lenia, do you have cigarettes?

I'm at least 15 years older than him, but these guys keep me as almost one of their age, maybe because I'm not married and empty beer cans prevail in my garbage.

– Hold on.

I'm not smoking myself, but there's always a pack or two of cigarettes at home for

visiting hackers. Smoking is their professional trait. The guy waited by the door patiently while I put the canister on the floor and was searching in the closet.

– Here.

He nodded gratefully opening the pack, I waved my hand-keep it- and closed the door. The carnivores should be fed. A little. So they wouldn't become too impudent and would retain an idea of me being a 'nice guy' even in their alcohol intoxicated minds.

I undressed quickly, threw the clothes on the bed and came to the bathroom, stood under cold shower for a while.

No sleeping tonight, the deep is waiting.

For all day long I tried not to think about Man Without Face and the Medal of Complete Licence lying in the warehouse but now, in the darkness when virtuality was coming close I couldn't help not to think about that.

The Man and the Medal.

The whip and the cookie.

What so strange could happen in "Labyrinth" that even two divers couldn't manage, the professionals who work if anonymously but as permanent contractors nevertheless? Those who know "Labyrinth" as palms of their hands…

Something having no analogies?

Very odd.

I dried myself, threw the towel into the bowl with laundry, returned to the room, turned the computer on and started to pull on the virtual suit.

– Good evening Lenia, – said Vika.

– Hi old girl.

Female face is smiling on the screen. No, possibly I'm wrong, I need to set the different reaction to 'old girl' – slight resentment, pouting, a look cast slightly aside.

– Any mail?

– Seven letters.

– Read.

There was nothing interesting in the mail: invitations to visit two new clubs, price lists of some small trading company, the letter from Maniac sent in the morning…

– Delete everything, – I said sitting by the computer. I plugged the suit in and put on the helmet. – Vika, connect to Deeptown… through the spare channel. Person number seven.

I didn't use this connection for at least three months, as well as the 'person number seven': steel colored suit, black shirt, a necktie, high leather boots, slim agile body, swarthy narrow face, hair long to the shoulders, low and powerful voice.

– Spare channel, person number seven, – confirmed Vika.

The rainbow before my eyes, greedy flaming of the fiery wave, the deep.

I'm sitting in the tiny room: the bed, the table with the computer on it, not mine but absolutely abstract one, the door. "Journey Start" Hotel. Those Deeptown inhabitants who just occasionally visit the Deep rent rooms here for cheap.

– Is everything okay, Lenia?

– Yes.

I open the door and leave. There's the long corridor with doors outside, by one of those stands Sylvester Stallone looking at his hands with admiration.

– Hi Sly, – I say passing by. Almost for sure the guy is Russian, and what's definitely-he's a newbie.

– Do I really look like him? – asks the guy with hope.

– Yeah… – I stop. The beer makes my mood benevolent, – Are you new in the deep?

– In what? Ah yes.. new.

– It's a bad form to put on appearances of famous people, and also the sign of newbie. Try to construct your own personality… use 'Bioconstructor' for instance and work a little.

– 'Bioconstructor'? – asks the guy confused.

– Yes. A very simple program with Russian interface, it is scattered around on all servers in the novice directories.

– Thanks… – 'Stallone' drags himself along behind me. I notice that he started to stoop as if being ashamed of his appearance: a good sign.

We enter elevator together and descend to the first floor. The lobby is pretty spacious, four porters and two guards are always watching there.

– Come to any of them, – I advise, – And ask for consultation: where to go for the start, how to act…

– It's embarrassing…

– It's embarrassing to be a fool. These guys are here just for that: to help you. When in the streets ask for advice the people with an open hand sign on the sleeve, they are volunteer helpers, or policemen. Have you set your timer?

– Yes, sure! For two hours!

– Very good. Spend 15 minutes to talk to the porter and you'll save much more. Happy sailing!

– Happy sailing! – says admired novice behind me. It's so nice to be an old-timer…

I wink to the porter and nod towards 'Stallone' in case he'll be too shy to ask for help himself and leave the hotel. I raise my hand and the cab stops immediately: this is not reality…

– Deep-Transit is glad to welcome you, Gunslinger! – says the driver.

– To "Labyrinth of Death", administrative building, – I reply.

1001

There exist the games and The Games.

The difference is in longevity.

Computer industry releases up to 1000 games every year, both intended for the Deep and for ordinary users.

The game usually 'lives' actively for around half a year. It is distributed legally and through the pirate channels, is being discussed, all its intended and random tricks are being caught. And then it dies… kept only by a couple of hundreds of fans.

Sometimes exceptions happen – and then the game lives for years. Many new, much more perfect and beautiful games appear but the old one retains crowds of fans too.

And there are three exceptions that are alive since the pre-virtual era: 'Doom', 'C&C' and 'Mortal Combat'. They have changed dozens of times of course but these were more cosmetics than real changes.

'C&C' is a strategic game, it's virtual space is the whole planet. On this humble target range those never-to-be Napoleons and Zhukovs eternally fight for the world's dominance commanding nonexistent armies in imaginary headquarters. Tank tracks are rattling there and missiles fly up to the skies, new terrible weapons are being developed, world's capitals are being burned to ashes by nuclear explosions. One doesn't need to be quick or keen in this game, strategic thinking is most important. They say that the Military watches this game very attentively and sometimes successful players get offers to join the army. Some people seem scared by that, the others are attracted on the contrary. I have played these 'adult tin soldiers' a little. In my opinion the game is harmless and quiet. Dressed in a beautiful uniform, you walk with a cup of coffee back and forth in the headquarters crowded with trained aides and say : 'Ummm.. what if we drop an H-bomb at Los Angeles?'

The game have changed a little last year, now one has to start it as a lieutenant being in command of a small regiment in tactic battles, submitting to somebody else's orders and to rise slowly up the hierarchy until he reaches the rank of the Chief Commander of his country. Now there's a possibility of coups, betrayal, guerilla war 'against everybody'… I don't know, the game have become more interesting possibly, but I liked the previous rules more.

'Mortal Combat' is even simpler. This is a scuffle in virtual space. One might put on one of hundreds of ready-to-use guises or build his own and to take part in a multiple day tournament for the right to fight the main villain that plots to conquer the Earth. This is the useful

game, nowhere else can one steam out his sick emotions like on the gloomy arenas of 'Mortal Combat', hitting his enemy with the heel on his forehead of thrusting magic spells onto him. Good game, I visit it once or twice a month but some people never quit the duels. They say that if one doesn't abuse magic which unfortunately is not available in reality, it is possible to learn to fight pretty well. I doubt it though: the hit that one feels with the help of virtual suit is one thing but the real steel reinforcement that you'll be hit with in the street is absolutely different.

And of course there's 'Doom', that very game getting into which had ushered the beginning of the virtual era.

It's main area is called simply "Labyrinth of Death". This really is a labyrinth: 50 levels, some of them located in buildings and underground vaults, others-on the streets of the Twilight City, an imaginary megapolis captured by an alien civilization. It's the Deep within a Deep with its own laws and rules.

The game starts at the first level – the half ruined railway station where the player arrives by the section car, with a single gun as a weapon. The station building is crowded with monsters – former Twilight City inhabitants, and other players. It's difficult to say who is more dangerous: monsters are armed better but the players are smarter than machines obviously. One can find weapons, defense gear, first-aid sets and food in the station building. When one leaves the first level, he gets to the second one: the highway full of abandoned cars… and of course, of other players and monsters. In order to win one must reach the 50th level, the ancient cathedral in the downtown and to destroy the alien ruler. It's very hard. I did it before but since then "Labyrinth" have changed at least ten times: new buildings, weapons and monsters were added. And of course, new players have arrived: game addicts who can't imagine their lives without shooting on the streets of Twilight City.

It's an interesting game, mainly because it requires constant communication with other people, not just 'fighting to death' like in

'Mortal Combat', not diplomatic notes and threats exchange like in 'C&C' but direct communication: making unions, convincing others, some small worldly wisdoms…

But just what so unusual could happen in the "Labyrinth"'s space?

1010

"Labyrinth"'s administrative building is a two story house in Deeptown's suburbs, faced with rose colored coquina. It looks peacefully and neat, more like a residential building than an office. Maybe American middle class families use to live in houses like this. Labyrinth entrance is a bit further and obviously it looks much more impressive. I stand in the garden and examine the guard by the entrance. He's dressed into masking overalls, the standard players' uniform, with carbine in his hands. His muzzle has absolutely 'impenetrable' expression, he stands motionless like a statue. Is he a human or not? It's foolish to ask, at least because one can't distinguish well made program from a human at once. I pass the guard and find myself in a small hall. The bright sunlight beams through windows, small tables and soft armchairs stand along the walls. More solid table is in the center of the hall, a smiling girl sits by it: the secretary and most likely live one.

– Good afternoon, – I say.

The secretary's face changes a little.

– Good afternoon, – she replies. The voice is soft and nice, looks like I was switched to Russian employee.

– I need to meet with the management, – I begin without ceremonies.

– Please be more specific if possible.

The girl is the courtesy itself but it's not easier to break through her barrier than through the monster by Al-Kabar's bridge.

– I have a confidential information for "Labyrinth"'s management.

– But still I'd like you to state the goal of your visit briefly.

Ah well…

– I'd like to relay to Mr Guillermo Aguirre that I'm informed about the small problem that have arisen recently and about the fact that divers cooperating with you had failed to solve it. I'm going to offer my services in solving this problem.

The secretary nods.

– One moment please.

She stands up without a hurry and enters one of the inner doors. I wait patiently. Everything is very cute and patriarchal: no computers, no monsters. It's not the office of the most expensive and dreadful ride in the history but a small toilet paper sales firm.

The girl is away for long, I get tired of standing and sit into one of armchairs, browse through newspapers scattered on the nearby table. It's quiet and peaceful, no other visitors except me, though they in fact are present most likely. We just can't see each other and they

communicate with other company's employees.

– Mister…

– Gunslinger, – I say standing up. – Call me Gunslinger.

The girl nods.

– Mr Guillermo Aguirre will receive you.

Slight curiosity in her voice, it looks like she had no idea that any problems might arise in "Labyrinth".

I enter the door and freeze.

This is beautiful.

The hall is in the form of unequal sided triangle, one wall is completely transparent and one can see the city from the big height, lighted by red sunset light. Not Deeptown but Twilight City most likely. The table of "Labyrinth"'s security manager, Mr Guillermo is horseshoe-shaped, three monitors are installed on it, a keyboard and nothing else. Mr Guillermo himself already rises to meet me, he's aged, lean, very suntanned, dressed in blinders and T-shirt.

– Hello, – he says stretching his hand to me first. – So you are the Gunslinger, yes? Call me just Willy.

Okay, let it be Willy.

I shake his hand.

– You said so interesting things, yes? About problems, divers, help…

– Willy laughs and waves his hands, – Boom! Boom! That help?

Very interesting interpreter program, the strong accent, parasite words like Guillermo speaks Russian himself. One starts feel different towards the guy immediately.

– Let's be honest, okay? – I offer. Willy-Guillermo knits his brow and nods. – I'm diver.

– Yes?– inquires Willy politely – And what is that?

I smile in return and say:

– I think that your Ukranian and Canadian employees would explain that to you quicker. I mean the divers working on permanent contract with you.

Willy looks at me silently for a long time, then nods:

– I thought that Anatol is Russian. He's Ukranian?

Yeah, Man Without Face is informed much better than "Labyrinth"'s security manager.

– These are just details.

– Take a seat Gunslinger… – Willy moves an armchair to me then pads to the window looking at the city poured by blood colored blaze, – So, you're diver?

I nod.

– This is very interesting. Unusual! – Willy raises his forefinger, – Everybody look for divers, everybody have requests, business,

questions… you came to us by yourself.

I stay silent.

Willy turns around and looks at me.

– You have a nice suit Gunslinger, – he says, – It'd be good to add… a small cap to it. A small gray cap.

I see. A simple test.

– Vika…

Willie smiles: it's the same little trick as was done by Man Without Face, I'm cut off from my operating system, I could expect that type of surprise.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours…

It turned out that my head is aching badly. Must be the beer…

I took off the helmet, grabbed the mouse, launched 'Bioconstructor', hastily opened the 'Clothing' window, then 'Headgear', found something looking like beret or cap. Then I filled it with steel gray color and hooked it on my figure, person number seven, Gunslinger…

deep Enter Beret is on my head. I'm not sure whether it's what Mr Aguirre wanted or not but he looks satisfied.

– We value the divers' work. – says Willy. – But our permanent employees quite manage it. We need time, small. We'll offer you interesting work, yes?

I shake my head, beret slides to the side.

– Mr Guillermo, – I say respectfully but resolutely, – I'm talking about one certain problem which I want to help "Labyrinth" to solve.

I see his eyebrows raised in surprise.

– Recently a strange accident have happened in "Labyrinth"…

I fall silent and wait for his reaction. Willy is obviously deep in thought.

– Accident? – he nods towards the window, – We have thousands of accidents here every day. War! Shooting! Cheerfulness!

Was Man Without Face really mistaken? I start feeling myself like an idiot.

– Your divers… – I start. – Did they manage their duties yesterday for instance?

This is the only thing I know: "Labyrinth"'s divers hadn't justified hopes.

– Ah! – Willy nods, – Ah! Unfortunate!

I nod just in case.

– Is it a problem? – Aguirre becomes serious.

– As far as I know, yes.

Pause. Guillermo weighs something in his mind.

– Mr Gunslinger, what do you know?

It's no use to lie, the man before me is not the one it's worthy to

bluff with.

– Very little. I was informed that there's a problem in "Labyrinth", that your divers failed to solve it. I was asked to render an assistance to you.

A pause again. I'm anonymous and it's risky to let me into unpleasant sides of the Company's life but Guillermo has a 'good nose' for troubles and methods of overcoming them.

– You'll sign a single-time contract? – his tone becomes quick and business-like.

– Yes.

– Complete nondisclosure of the situation, – he adds, – with all possible penalties.

– Yes…

– Please Gunslinger, – he points at his table. I pad closer being sure that it'll be now when I'll sign the cooperation documents but Willy points at the monitor in the middle. – This is 33rd level of "Labyrinth" Mr Gunslinger, 'Disneyland'.

I look at the level and don't like it at all, at least because when I was there last time it looked completely different.

– Very-very bad level, – says Willy. – Hard. This is the beginning: 'Russian Hills' { *roller coaster* }. This is… – he puts his hand on the keyboard and the picture slides a little aside, – a Grabber Demon. Bad!

Gee, as if good demons ever came out of "Labyrinth" creators' minds…

– This is him… – one more touching the keys, – Unfortunate.

Guillermo keeps silent, not for theatrical pause – it's nothing unusual on the screen. He's just thinking.

– So the problem is this Gunslinger? Yes?

No ordinary Deeptown inhabitant can exit the deep by himself: he'll just never see the computer, won't be able to enter the exit command or to contact the operating system with voice. It's only in virtual houses with drawn analogs of real computers installed where subconsciousness gives a kind break. One can exit the deep only where it was entered: in his imaginary home which might be a palace or a hut but with a 'real' computer.

That's why timers exist. They are plugged into all programs, from Microsoft's Windows-Home to Russian 'Virt-Navigator' and 'Deep-Commander'. The longest time for being in the deep is 48 hours, the time during which the human won't die of starvation and water loss. Reasonable users always set their timers for less though: a couple of hours, a day… Maniac who set his timer for 36 hours was already an exception. The waking of somebody who have spent two days in the deep is…. a foul smelling sight.

Of course it is possible to break and disable the timer. Or to break it and add a couple of zeros to the number '48' but such kamikaze are rarely found and their end is mournful.

Like Unfortunate's.

It's impossible to pass "Labyrinth of Death" in a single attempt, one can't just have strength for that. The drowsiness retreats in virtuality but there are the limits of stamina anyway. That's why players get access to the game menu at the end of each level where there's an option to save their coordinates and to exit to the outer deep, to exit in order to return later.

But sometimes there are optimists that decide to pass "Labyrinth" in one attempt to repeat that very first legendary submersion into virtuality. They break the security timer, sometimes by themselves, sometimes using some hacker's program, they cut off their guaranteed retreat and dive to the very bottom.

It's the divers who drag them back. All big game centers have communication with somebody of us. The biggest ones even keep anonymous employees on permanent contract. It's cheaper to pay us than relatives of the player who died of exhaustion.

I was looking at Unfortunate. He was dressed in regular masking overalls, protection mask-helmet and had only a gun as a weapon: he either entered the 33rd level like this or was killed here already. After demise in "Labyrinth" the player is being restored at the beginning of the level automatically, with minimum of gear.

– This is ridiculous, – I said.

– What? – Guillermo is interested.

– For how long is he there?

– For 39 hours. We trace players since their getting into the system.

So Man Without Face got interested in Unfortunate almost as soon as he got into "Labyrinth"? He watched him attentively and began his search for divers immediately.

– His timer could be set for 48 hours.

– Yeah. Ah, how unappetizing! – sighs Guillermo, – Pee-pee, poo-poo into the virtual suit… EWW.

Why did Man Without Face set the alarm?

Nothing terrible have happened yet anyway, it's just yet another self confident game addict.

– Does he sit like this for a long time?

– For almost 24 hours, – nodded Guillermo, – Yes, it's strange. He tried to pass the level for five times… then submitted himself… sat by the entrance.

– And what did you do?

– We've sent Anatol, – Guillermo pulls his hands apart, – He can do that… to lead to the end of the level…

– And?…

I have to drag the information from him with wild horses, not because Guillermo hides something from me, he just can't understand what exactly interests me, he got used to communicate with well prepared divers that understand everything on the fly.

– Please explain the situation in an orderly fashion, Willy.

Guillermo nods.

– The player entered the level 39 hours ago. He was killed 5 times, very quickly.

– By the Demon?

– Oh no… he poof-poofed the Demon! By other players. Then he sat down and is still sitting. We sent Anatol, he drove the Unfortunate and they were both killed. Anatol started for the second time but they failed again: the customer was killed. Anatol was very angry, he shot dead everybody there, – Guillermo laughs leniently, – Today divers were supposed to try together. I'll request the report, yes?

– Yes… – I say not turning my eyes from the screen. A young guy is there, dressed in overalls and holding a gun. What scared Man Without Face? Why does he think that events don't have analogies? Why does he offer the Medal of Complete License for a simple task? – Willy, have anything else strange happened?

I get the weak hope that the different task was meant.

– No.

– Nothing?

– Nothing-nothing! – Guillermo parts his hands – We take care of

our customers. Everything is under control in "Labyrinth".

I'm looking at the screen, waiting.

– A-ha… – sais Aguirre curiously, – yes-yes… There were two more attempts to lead him out this morning… and three times more in the afternoon. All failed.

– And surely you didn't know about that? – I can't resist to be mordant.

– We don't fetter our employees' initiative, – answers Guillermo with dignity, – The situation isn't critical yet.

Of course he's right but I get a slight, vague anxiety. Who is he, the player gotten into trouble, US President, the Pope, Dmitry Dibenko?

– Who is he? – I ask aloud. Guillermo shrugs.

– This is unknown.

– You don't control your users?

– We're an entertainment center, not the KGB, – he answers with taste,

– Information can be stolen. How do you think, will the solid top corporate manager or Arabian sheikh be happy if some tabloid publishes an article about their adventures in the drawn world?

– And what's so bad?

– For you – nothing. The ordinary person will laugh. But solid people like little-little when they are laughed at.

– Can you cut him off manually?

– How?

How, really? Even if they trace the line using which the player entered the Labyrinth and cut off the connection, nothing will change. The person would just be hung in the void or the world around him would freeze like a photograph depending on what his subconsciousness would decide. It's the same as to cover the drowning person with a non transparent cover so that he would not bother the rest of the swimmers.

– Please trace his channel anyway…

– It's very hard, – Guillermo points at the city outside with imposing gesture, – Now there's 2036… excuse me, 2035 players already… This is 2035… no, now 2037 phone lines. All that is delivered to 28 main servers, then is being divided into levels and processed by our own and rented computers on all continents. We use 4 satellites to synchronize the data exchange. Either Internet user or an unorganized one who called one of 700 company numbers can connect to "Labyrinth"…

– I see… – No, it's possible to trace Unfortunate anyway but this fun will be so terribly expensive that it's useless to try to convince Guillermo to do it. – Can you summon your divers here?

– They are not online now.

It's understandable too, if they really tried to get Unfortunate out for whole 24 hours then they must simply sleep sluggishly now, one of them in Ukraine, the other one in Canada. Maybe they curse aloud in their sleep.

– Okay, – I decide. – Is it possible to enter the 33rd level directly?

Guillermo looks aside.

– Have you played long time ago? Do you still have your records saved?

– No…

– Then you'll have to go from the very beginning.

This is what I didn't expect.

– What's the bull? All games have service channels for traveling between levels. Are you an exception?

– Yes.

– But why?

– "Labyrinth" has a big prize fund for setting new level record or fast finishing the entire game.

– I remember, but… is it a big fund?

– The main prize is half a million dollars. This money will go to the one who manages to pass all levels and destroy the Alien Prince in 47 hours 59 minutes! – the commercial type solemnness starts to sound in Guillermo's voice.

Oy-oy-oy….

Why am I not a player?

– This is big money, – notes Guillermo for some reason, – Yes? Any codes that give nonsusceptibility or full weaponry and gear to the player would be figured when one talks about half a million. Any service channel would be found and used. We would be forced to pay prize amounts too often… or to be exact, never.

– But how do your divers work?

– They had passed "Labyrinth" previously. They have records on all levels, in all dangerous places. They need just a couple of minutes to get where they need.

Great beginning…

– How much time does it require to reach the 33rd level?

– From 25 hours to infinity.

What was Man Without Face counting on anyway? If "Labyrinth"'s divers fail to get Unfortunate out in 24 hours it means it's impossible at all…

Guillermo is silent watching me.

– Can I get level maps at least? – I ask, – Complete ones?

– No. There's no complete maps in existence. "Labyrinth" changes constantly and on its own. This is not a movie, not a book after all

Gunslinger. This is the whole world, the miracle world! The miracle can't be static.

Part 2. "Labyrinth"

0

The Portal through which "Labyrinth" is connected to the rest of the deep is really beautiful. It's a huge black marble ark going up into the sky. Purple sparks slide along it back and forth and low rumble is emitted by the stone, sometimes accompanied with deep nonhuman sighs. The ark's entrance is filled with swirling red fog.

And right into this fog people are coming, slowly as if mesmerized. Maybe not all or them are real, some of them are created by "Labyrinth"'s sysops for more solemnity but it's impressive anyway.

I join the common flow.

– Hey…

The guy walking by my side touches my shoulder:

– What's your name?

– Gunslinger.

– I'm Alex.

– Nice to meet you… – I turn away, but the guy doesn't leave me alone.

– Going to the first level?

– Yes.

– Let's go together? It's much simpler, honestly!

I examine him. He has obviously individually created appearance, his manners are somehow insolent but self confident.

– We'll pass 5-6 first levels together, – he goes on, – they are simple but it'll be easier to warm up. After that we'll separate if you want. Well?

– Okay.

We shake hands and walk side by side. The bloody fog envelops us, nothing can be seen around anymore. The voice comes from the sky:

– Your entrance mode?

– Pair entrance! – says Alex, – Alex and Gunslinger!

– Pair entrance, – I repeat, – Gunslinger and Alex!

The fog dissipates slightly. We're standing by the section car that rests on the rusted rails. Two overalls are scattered on it together with two mask helmets and two guns. All our 'fellow travelers' have vanished somewhere. We check the chargers and change.

– There'll be a trap by the station building, this is obvious… – mutters Alex, – We can't relax… Where are you from, Gunslinger?

– From Mommy and Daddy.

No more questions arise. We climb the section car and start pumping the lever. The old rattletrap accelerates quickly, we move through dissipating fog.

– Gunslinger, do you like [Stephen] King or what?

– Why?

– Well, your nick… or you just shoot well?

– You'll see.

We leave the fog. The rails are going along crumbling embankment, the station building is ahead burned like the Reichstag building after the storm. The likeness is improved by the red flag on the dome. Either it's an entourage detail (some Westerners are still setting their scores with the communism), or some Bolshevik have decided to commemorate the revolution anniversary. The latter is more likely, November 7th is in three days.

– Now look attentively and be prepared, – says Alex from behind my back, – The trap is there for sure. You know, everybody needs the spare charger…

– I know, – I say turning around. I shoot twice and the already aimed gun falls from the hand of my short-time ally. I bend down to him. Alex gulps the air with his mouth looking at me with senseless eyes. The program gives him 5 more seconds to understand his defeat. – And in fact, I like King too, – I inform him picking up his gun.

That's all. I had one gun with 8 cartridges, now I have two guns with 14 cartridges.

I throw the body down over the section car's skirting, under the embankment, onto the pile of similar looking bodies. It was me who was supposed to end up there according to Alex's plan.

– I was playing 'Deathmatch' when you even couldn't reach up to the keyboard, – I friendly say in parting. The body will decay quickly, in around 6 hours. That's how it is made here, otherwise all "Labyrinth"'s space would be filled up with bones.

The station building gets closer. I look at it trying to understand what have changed since my last time here. It seems to me that tower at the right wing was missing before.

The section car passes the frozen train, new and clean one, with people sitting by its windows. Their bodies are covered by some grayish film. This is the refugees' train that the aliens had burned when it attempted to leave the Twilight City. I look at the 'refugees' that sit decorously along the windows. Oh yeah. Lamers you are, dear "Labyrinth"'s creators. You have no idea what the REAL evacuation is and how do REAL refugees look like.

I jump over the skirting and roll down the embankment. Let the overconfident newbies ride to the very building. I'd better do it on my own feet… slowly.

This will be more reliable.

1

The first level is simple by definition. It must be like this in order for the newbies to draw themselves into the game and believe in their strengths… in order to come here more and more times. I approach the station building from its left wing and quickly check several familiar caches: in the sewer, in the power lowering booth and in the cabin of the overturned locomotive that lays across the tracks. There's nothing in the sewer, in the booth I find two chargers, and a sandwich wrapped in transparent wrapping is in the locomotive. No people or monsters show up yet and this is odd.

I approach one of the building's side entrances, stop by it for a second, then dash inside.

A-ha.

Two mutants run to me, two petty human-like demons. They are covered by some greenish mossy nasty stuff, rifles are in their knotty hypertrophied paws. The austere styled, 'professor' looking glasses remain on the face of one of them.

I shoot them point-blank, they even have no time to open fire. I change the charger and approach the bodies. Their rifles are destroyed by the bullets. Pity. One can't go very far with just a gun.

I walk through the building: the series of empty befouled halls, blood pools, walls covered by some desperate slogans and curses… Not a station building but the Brest fortress. { *The fortress on Soviet-Polish border that was one of the first to be attacked by the Nazis in the morning of June 22, 1941* } According to the game's legend it was here where the last battle between the city police and the aliens took place. I know that one can find a dying sergeant somewhere in the building's basement who will tell the terrible story of invasion and will give away his rifle before he dies. But I'm too lazy to search for this tear-squeezing, endlessly dying program. I check some more caches one by one, finding brass-knuckles which I immediately put on my left hand, a couple of hand grenades and finally a two barrel carbine.

A couple of times I can see the human figures in the distance but they don't start the hunt and I leave them alone too: no time for that. I go to the exit to the building square. There, on the table with a bloodied female corpse under it… it always lays there… the computer is quietly working. The game menu is on the screen. I save my game, refuse an offer to quit and move further, to the second level.

Holding the rifle in my hands I run out of the building, creep to the road bending down low and hiding behind the trees. Not for nothing: I'm being shot at from somewhere like the higher stories of the building. They miss.

Most likely it's a human, monsters are dumb but keen.

The square is full of slightly dusty but quite operable cars. Their owners had boarded that train… I'm hiding behind the boxy and crumpled Ford and wait.

I always wait here…

In around five minutes a human dashes out of the building and approaches the cars in quick runs.

I raise and aim my rifle at him. The guy stops, he wasn't ready for a trap now, at the very end of the level…

– Get in! – I motion at the Ford with my rifle's barrel. Looks like the player doesn't understand me. I can't see the face from behind his mask but even if I could, the drawn face will say nothing about his nationality but he doesn't look like Russian.

– Get into the car and drive!

He understands, the interpreter program have kicked in. He approaches slowly, opens the door and sits inside.

– Hey! – the voice is hardly heard. I turn around not losing the sight of my captive. The slightly familiar figure stands in the breach in the dome. Alex. Wow, he managed to catch up with me, he entered the game again and caught up. Looks like it was him shooting at my back… – I'll make you! Do you hear me?! No peace for you! I'll make you!

The certain international gesture from me causes him to open volley fire but he has only a few loads while the distance is big. Throwing the rifle aside he tries to aim at me with a gun and at that moment the purple shadow rises behind his back. Geez, the fiery chokers can be encountered on the first level already. The glowing paws grab Alex by the throat and he falls down on his knees, flutters and shoots over his shoulder. I'm too lazy to wait for the outcome.

I sit into the car. The prisoner who submissively waited until the end of the talk, starts the car. He drives slowly, turning around often as if expecting a shot at the back of his head.

The highway is quite busy. Huge trailers try to catch up and ram us a couple of times. I lower the window and shoot them with rifle aiming at tires and windshield. These are just trifles yet, the monsters, "Labyrinth"'s creations. It's not them whom we should be afraid of.

The man in the front shudders when I shoot at first, then gets used to it.

The real enemies wait for us at the road junction. Three cars are blocking the road, armed people are hiding behind them, one stands openly in a casual, self confident pose. He has rocket launcher in his hands.

Shit. I have heard that there is heavy weaponry in the station building somewhere but never bothered to check.

– What will we do? – asks my prisoner.

One should be an idiot to try to fight the gang like this alone, it's easier to submit yourself and sacrifice some of your weapons hoping to be let go after that.

– Slow down gradually. Stop after my third shot.

He nods silently.

The bandit with rocket launcher looks at us amused, waiting.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours… let me go, Abyss…

I looked at the picture accustoming myself. The bandit… cars… the back of my driver's head … the sight's cross in the middle of the screen.

The cheater I am.

I stretched my hand, touched the mouse, moved it along the pad. The cross slid along the screen.

Here we go.

I opened fire, shooting with the left mouse button and reloading the rifle with the right one. The bright yellow shells flew across the whole screen, the headphones rumbled. After I shot those three who were visible, I moved my shooting at the cars. It's not easier to hit the fuel tank in virtuality than in reality but when you shoot at the drawn silhouettes, this is the task for a kid.

deep Enter What the hell, didn't I tell you to stop?!

– Stop! – I shout to the driver.

He stops right before the burning cars and turns around. Even through the dark glasses of the mask terror and admiration can be seen.

– How did you do that?

– Get out.

He obviously waits for one more shot, but I plainly point at the bodies, both shot by me and killed in the cars' explosions. Go gather the weapons. He won't dare to try to shoot me now. The speed and accuracy demonstrated by me is practically impossible for an ordinary player, only for the diver… and an old doomer who is used to the mouse.

Doomers already were divided into 'keyboardists' and 'mousists'. The eternal argument who is cooler was never solved: virtuality had come.

Now I dot the "i's".

One of the bandits is still alive. His foul language is so colorful and intricate that his national origin is obvious. The player's face is covered with blood, one hand is partially ripped off, with the other one he tries to reach the first-aid set. Only 5% of strength had left in him but the set would save him.

I pad closer, he notices me, jerks and shouts:

– Who? Who are you, asshole?!

And another 'multistory' phrase follows.

– Gunslinger, – I reply aiming the rifle barrel at the swearer's forehead. I don't like when one curses like this. Either the girl or a kid could be in my body after all.

We have to spend at least five minutes to gather all the trophies. Now I'm equipped excellently: guns, the rifle with an optical sight, the carbine, the rocket launcher, first-aid sets, grenades, the armor vest. My prisoner is equipped no worse, he just doesn't have the rocket launcher.

It's impossible to drag away such a pile of iron in reality, but here we all are Rambos a little.

– Let's go, – I say to the prisoner, getting into the car. He understands without translation.. We drive along the highway, I can't resist and shoot one more trailer using the rocket launcher. Of course I leave the car firstly… Labyrinth"'s creators had a good sense of humor and I don't want to watch my insides on the car's ceiling at all.

The second level ends at the suburbs of the Twilight City. We leave the car together and save our result using the computer which is diligently working on the ruins of a small cottage. Only after this my fellow traveler calms down. I wave my hand to him and go towards the sever cover hatch. The most reliable way through the third level lies through shit. A few people use it, it's too disgusting despite the shower at the end of the level. But I don't care, I'll pass the sewer looking at the screen and moving the mouse.

– Hey! – shouts my fellow traveler behind me – Why did you need me? You are the coolest one I've ever met!

Maybe he expects the reply like 'it's easier together' or even an offer to go together further, but I didn't like that he almost crashed into burning cars, so I tell the truth:

– I don't know how to drive and it's too long to walk on foot.

He just stays by the computer, bewildered and overfilled with impressions. And quite well equipped for the beginning of the third level, by the way…

10

I pass 14 levels. In 7 hours. The legend was born today.

Corpses and ruins were left behind my back. Only on the 6th level I was delayed for a while: it's very-very new and unwonted. Then I was stuck on the 12th, I've encountered similar levels before but the arena is always the arena and crushing a hundred plus monsters is not like pushing three buttons.

Fortunately other players almost never interfere anymore. The rumors are creeping across "Labyrinth" crossing levels with the ease impossible even for divers. The deep is not an obstacle for rumors, nothing could ever stop them.

Rumors are diver's enemy but now they spread fear across and this works to my advantage.

By the end of the 14th level I realize that I can't stand it anymore, I get out of the deep for a moment and see that it's almost 7 am. It's only bad for computers to be shut down, the opposite is true for humans.

The 14th level is the city's sport center. The computer with the game menu was standing on the judges' table by the huge swimming pool where corpses of crocodile-like amphibious monsters were lazily swaying in clear water. It's quite difficult to kill those so I had to use the plasma gun to boil up the water in the pool. When the water cooled down, I dived in the stinky broth and waited for the pursuers for about 10 minutes: two hysterical players, the guy and the gal that followed me for three levels already. They were in hurry being sure that I'll leave the sport center immediately and stormed into the hall recklessly yet beautifully: the guy with the plasma gun by his belt and the gal with the carbine atilt. I launched a rocket at them, right from underwater and they both vanished in the fiery swirl.

I crawled out of the pool leaning upon the boiled monster's body and looked into the crater. Nothing was left there, the guy's plasma gun's energy cells had detonated.

– I'm the Gunslinger, – I say anyway. It had become a ritual already and I like good traditions.

I save my result: "Gunslinger, 14" and click the exit button: we'll do everything right and honestly, I'll have a rest and return, return for sure.

The hatch opens in the floor by the judges' table and after jumping into it I find myself in the changing room.

The exit from "Labyrinth" is as solemn and magnificent as the entrance, though it's a different solemnity, a cheerful one. The room with pink marble walls, bright sunlight in the ceiling window, soft

armchair, the table with fruits and food, the huge carved redwood closet. I take off my armor, helmet, masking overalls and stuff it into my 'individual closet' together with the pile of weapons. Only I will be able to use the goodies I've earned when reentering "Labyrinth". I take the shower and change. That's it, time to go. I don't want to break the program, enough headaches for me, after all it takes just 5 minutes to get to the hotel and exit in a regular fashion.

The changing rooms' doors lead to the spacious hall with columns from where Deeptown's streets can be seen. This is the border between the Twilight City and the rest of virtuality, as vague as a sound barrier in the ocean.

The hall is usually empty: players leave their changing rooms without hurry and then, in groups or alone they go to nearby restaurant "BFG-9000" or to "Kakodemon" bar to drink for their victory or defeat…

Today almost 100 people have gathered here and it was my merit. It seemed that everybody killed by me were present. Everyone leaving changing rooms is being closely examined as if they could see and remember my face under the mask-helmet. I'm being examined too but probably I don't fit into the image of merciless Gunslinger which they remembered during last moments of the game.

I approach the nearest group, the talk dies there and the muscular man with a square chin asks sharply:– Gunslinger?

Luckily, I get what he means and nod…

– Yeah… – resentment and rage are on my face, – With a rocket launcher, ass hole… and then says: "I'm the Gunslinger!"

Hm, it's a bit overdone possibly… it's pretty hard to hear just anything after being hit by the rocket, but Gunslinger's figure is already surrounded by mystical aura and my words about the rocket launcher are accounted as usual looser's excuses.

– You're the hundredth, – says the squared-chin guy, – I'm Tolik { *Anatoly* }

– I'm Lenia.

– Gee, he killed a hundred people on the spot, sucker! – informs Tolik with admiration and hate, – Just where did he come from, I wonder… Meet my friends: Jean, Damir, Katya… He made us all in the 9th level.

To be honest I don't remember, it was too noisy there: the one before the last attempt of the players to get together and crush the impudent Gunslinger in a body.

– And me – on 15th! – I say, – I was moving so well, but he…

– Have you heard this? – shouts Tolik, – The Gunslinger had moved on to the 15th!

The crowd answers with excited buzz.

I wave my hand hopelessly and head for the exit.

– Hey! – shouts Tolik, – Won't you wait for him?

– I don't have a rubber pocket! – I reply, – You'll soap up his mug by yourselves…

– This is true, – nods Tolik, – If we manage to recognize him.

He suspects me anyway but just can't confirm his suspicions.. I nod, make the next step and see Alex.

My first victim stands a little aside, silently listening to the dialogue with interest, it looks like he ain't gonna interfere. It's vendetta, one on one.

Works fine for me. I pass by him… a couple of seconds more and I'll enter Deeptown's street…

– Gunslinger! – I'm called from behind and a hundred of people exhales together.

I turn around, the voice was too insistent, it's no use to play the fool anymore.

It's not Alex, it's Guillermo.

– Gunslinger, – he comes closer, – I'm sorry to take your time… You have beaten 8 level records, yes?

Maybe. I look not at Guillermo but at the hundred of my recent victims. Their looks don't promise me any good.

– The management have decided to inform you that you can't pretend for the declared prizes… yes? Because you work on contract with us.

Thanks God, he talks quietly at least now and we can't be heard.

– I wasn't going to, – I inform him feeling dizzy of rage.

Looks like Guillermo understands that he began this talk at the bad moment, but he was ordered to.

– Nevertheless, we want to pay you a little bonus… 200 dollars… in appreciation of your intensive work. You've made a very good publicity for "Labyrinth"… we can barely handle the flow of new players.

He pauses, looks around the hall and says in apologizing tone:

– You can drop by to get the money right now, with me. There are many exits from our office.

Thanks a lot. What I don't like is to be pushed into the swamp to be cordially offered a helping hand afterwards.

– I'll come when I have the chance.

Guillermo sighs and pulls his hands aside as if to say, "I'm the dependent guy, was ordered to tell you that…" He leaves somewhere into the depths of the hall, into some service corridors.

99 pairs of eyes look at me.

– I'm the Gunslinger, – I say.

99 pairs of feet get off the floor. No, 98.

Alex stands where he was, just pulls the long sparkling gun from his bosom and shouts:

– Run you sucker!

I don't like the name but the advice is good. All insulted ones, except maybe Alex understand in the back of their minds that they were killed absolutely fairly but right opposite is being shouted out and that's why everyone is ready to avenge those friends of theirs who were hurt for nothing, forgetting that they also were competitors very recently.

I run like crazy.

Several shots can be heard from behind – Alex desperately tries to stop the pursuers, then shouts behind me:

– I'll make you by my own…….

The shout cuts out: he's not the one with the virus weapons usable in Deeptown streets or maybe "Labyrinth"'s security came into action.

I run like crazy.

The last thing I need at this point is to dissolve in the air. If insulted players understand that I'm also a diver, the hunt will turn into badgering.

But man, if somebody knew HOW I want to sleep…

The side street, another, and another one. I lower level of detail to increase the speed and almost pass the building with the sign "Any Amusements" in four main languages of Deeptown.

To my luck the sign is big enough and I understand its meaning in time as well as recollect Maniac telling me about virtual brothels' security systems.

The choice is simple and I storm into rotating glass doors.

11

The 'retro' style is accepted here: massive soft furniture, the wide table with big decanter on it, plates with fruits. The silent bearded man in the corner looks like a furniture item. Who knows, maybe it's in fact a security program.

And along the wooden stairs from the second floor descends the dark haired woman in long dress. She looks a bit older than 30 and has such a detailed face that I almost feel tempted to leave the deep to look at it in a normal way in order to understand how it was possible to achieve so unusually human appearance.

The woman comes closer and I finally understand the meaning of the words 'ripened beauty'.

It's really so, she has nothing of that youth that reigns Deeptown streets and obviously no idea of innocence comes to mind and very good that it doesn't, she doesn't need it at all.

The woman stays silent and smiles. I feel that the pause comes too long and mumble:

– Hello…

She nods.

– Good evening.

– It seems to me that it's night already, – I say.

– It's always evening here.

Well, let's note this.

– Call me Madam, – the woman goes on.

– I'm…

– No name please, it's not necessary at all.

– I'm Gunslinger.

She nods.

– Very good. Did you drop by for a business… – a smile, – or are you just hiding from annoying friends?

I instinctively look at the glass door, silence and emptiness is behind it.

– Don't worry. Those who enter here don't see each other. Never.

– In the second case I'll have to leave obviously? – I inquire.

– No. We're always glad to have guests. You can just sit here, drink some coffee or wine.

– Coffee, – I decide.

The silent guard disappears behind the door. I pad to the sofa and sit down, Madam sits across me with a smile.

– Don't such random guests ruin you? – I ask .

– There's nothing more useful than random fortuities. Besides, we have a rule: the guest must at least browse the albums.

I look at her confused.

– The pictures of the girls.

– Ah yes, the pictures… – I finally get it, – Sure. With pleasure.

The guard brings coffee in small pot, Madam accurately pours it into cups.

I put a little sugar in it and make a sip. Coffee is strong and fragrant, very hot. Even the sleepiness retreats as if I have really taken some caffeine in.

– Should I show you all albums? – asks Madam.

Looks like she puts a double meaning in the question but my head is still too slow and I nod. Madam smoothly crosses the hall and takes several thick albums in hard covers of differently colored velvet from the closet, puts them on the table before me.

– I'll return to my room if you don't mind Gunslinger. If by chance…

– she smiles, – something interests you, just call for me.

– Okay, – I agree.

On the stairs already, Madam stops and adds:

– By the way… if you like the picture and want to see it in more detail, rub the image with your finger.

I nod and drink my coffee glancing at the albums.

Do they have any emergency exits here I wonder? Most likely they do.

Though I also can pretend that my timer worked and to dissolve in the air. In any case I'm saved. I've got the better of the hundred of enraged doomers, earned the doubtful fame and came 14 levels closer to Unfortunate. Maybe he'll be dragged out before I reach him but I did my best anyway.

Coffee was finished, I looked into the pot… just look, it's full again! The magic thing from '1001 nights'. I fill the second cup and pick up the black album. Looks like African women are here?

It turns out that no.

There was a picture of the girl chained to the chair on the very first page. The thick brick wall was behind her, her head thrown back and the face can't be seen but half naked body promises much. The chains are shiny, with purposefully big links. The leather lash lies under girl's feet on the floor.

O-ooo-kay…

I close the album and put it on the corner of the table. Let it wait for sadists/masochists.

It's definitely "All Amusements".

I look at the cover rainbow. Let's try to guess. The blue cover, for instance.

Hm, I guessed right. The Hollywood actor was smiling merrily

from the first picture, the one named as a sex symbol for the third year already.. He's dressed in leather jacket, high boots and lacy underwear. Wow my friend, just look how lucky you are…

There's no title under the picture obviously. Even if the poor cutie who never suffered from homosexuality tries to sue the brothel, it'll be very hard to prove anything. The photo is slightly altered and nobody will accept it as an evidence except for those of course who were in the deep and know how the brain excited by the deep program imagines things. But those who really know virtuality know its main law as well.

The freedom.

In everything and for everybody.

Probably this is right…

I put the actor on top of the lady in chains. Let them have their fun, poor martyrs.

The pink album. Is it really lesbians? Strange…

No, just couples. Two girls with defiant stares, one stands on her knees, the other leans onto the first one's shoulders, gazing at me. No-no-no. Not today. Not after 14 levels of "Labyrinth". Just lie aside for now, you'll not be bored together either, I can feel it.

The brown album. My imagination gives up, and I have to open it.

The old woman in flabby dress.

Oh my God, it's really for all tastes! Stirred up by curiosity, I rub the picture with my finger. The old lady on the photo becomes alive, smiles winsomely, starts dancing tripping with her legs and unbuttons her loose overall.

Granny, you're fucking crazy…

I put the brown album on top of the pink one and start laughing loudly.

The guard in the corner glances at me but stays silent. I can't help it and ask:

– Do the … customers happen?

I poke the brown album with my finger. The guard nods slowly.

The violet album. I turn it over in my hands trying hard to think of anything, then open it at the first page carefully: what if granddads are there?

She-goat.

I mean it: she-goat, the young one, whitish, with sharp short horns.

I don't laugh, I'm too exhausted already. But it's impossible to take a real goat into the deep so it's either a human operator or a program… that imitates sexual stereotypes of the young spoiled she-goat.

Granny, go milk the goat.

The three albums remain: the white, the green, the yellow. I open the white one, for some reason being tortured by thoughts of elves, angels and other heavenly creatures. Wrong guess, it's just women. As it should be, the famous top-model dressed in an evening dress

from Cardin is on the first page. Okay, I'll examine the dress later. I weigh the green album in my hand. What else have left that could feed the mighty erotic fantasies? Kids, of course. I open the album. A-ha. Juvenile millionaire, the movie star and aging housewives' favorite. Go help your Granny to hold the goat kiddo.

The yellow album. I guessed right again. The girl's face is vaguely familiar, I think she's an actress too. The entourage is amazing: the beach spreading to the horizon under the rising sun. Instead of tanning idly, better bring the bucket of goat milk into the house, baby.

Having finished with the most 'all' of offered amusements, I fill the goblet with wine, gesture at the pile of albums with non-traditional partners, the guard picks them up silently and brings away.

I had to take a better look at that one, with animals. I wonder, are there young crocodiles and the swans, ripened as Madam? Though, even if there are not, they'll be organized at the customer's request. Even the green squid or pit-bull.

I start looking through the white book making the girls to strip from time to time.

The choice is staggering. The movie stars and models end quite soon, followed by unfamiliar faces, unfamiliar but cute. I can't help myself and look at the very end of the album.

The clean white sheet is there and the title: "Draw your own happiness yourself".

Yeah, nobody would leave this place unsatisfied.

I start to browse the album faster. After all, it's possible to look at naked beauties, both still and moving, by less expensive means that being in the deep.

The African in palm leaf skirt on her hips, the Eskimo in furs, the Korean on the mat, the Polynesian with the ring in her nose… there's no racism in virtuality.

I turn the pages even quicker. One page, another and another…

Vika.

I freeze gazing at the girl that smiles to me every morning.

100

Madam appears quietly as a ghost, sits by my side and asks:

– Do you want more wine, Gunslinger?

I nod. Looks like I have spent a long time sitting here and looking at Vika. It was an evening twilight on the picture, she sat on the railing of the wooden verandah, the dark forest could be seen behind her, the dim yellow lantern in the high grass, the black mirror of the pool.

– We have many different customers here, – says Madam thoughtfully, – Some of them prefer movie stars, others – goats…

A slight smirk.

– Who is this girl?

Madam looks at me puzzled.

– Does she have a real prototype? – I ask.

The brothel mistress leans on my shoulder and looks at the picture for a long time.

– I don't have right to answer such questions Gunslinger. I even have no idea. It's thousands of faces here. Many of them might seem familiar to you, – a slight grin, – but this is not more than just a coincidence. Does she remind you somebody?

– Yes.

– Somebody real?

– Not exactly… – I cut my one-side openness, – Madam, can I… meet this girl?

– Of course, – our gazes meet, our faces are close, irony and mockery are in her eyes. – Ten dollars an hour. Forty dollars a night. Our prices are moderate, affordable to any hacker.

– You're cruel, – I say.

– Yes. When it seems to me that a nice young gentleman starts getting crazy, I'm cruel.

I take out the credit card.

– Forty dollars?

– Yes.

She accepts the money, hesitates, then says:

– Gunslinger, please listen to one story… Once there was a small silly girl, she studied in college, liked to hang in discos and to flirt with guys. And she loved a singer. He appeared on TV often, was interviewed, his pictures always were on magazine covers. He was a good singer and he sang about love. The girl believed in love very much.

– I know how these stories end, – I say. Not only Madam can be cruel.

– Once the singer arrived in her town during his tour, – Madam goes on.

– The girl was on all of his concerts. She jumped out on the stage with flowers and the singer kissed her cheek. Of course she had got what she wanted. On the second evening she entered his hotel room and left in the morning only. And never came to his concerts since. No, the singer really turned out to be a nice guy and a beautiful man. He was tender and sweet, sharp minded and cheerful. The girl didn't regret anything. But she didn't believe in love anymore. You know why?

– She mixed an illusion and reality, – I answer.

– You understand. Yes, sure. It would be better if he was dumb and dirty bastard. It would be much better. The girl would find the other ideal or would still love the singer's image. But this way… it was too much like a mirror, the love to reflection, the true and perfectly clean one. She really had met her dream, had found her ideal while it must be loved from a distance.

I nod.

Sure, Madam… Of course, the wise brothel mistress. Definitely, all-knowing master of love and sex.

I know.

– I'm sorry Madam, please remind me, have I paid you already?

The woman sighs.

– Follow me Gunslinger…

We ascend the stairs, there's a corridor, doors. Madam takes me to the door with number 6 and touches my shoulder.

– Take care Gunslinger… And by the way, the story that I've told you

– it happened not to me. But I know lots of such stories.

101

There's not a room but a garden behind the door, the night garden, crickets chirp softly, the air is fresh and cool, the dense grass is under my feet.

What did I expect after all? The hotel room with a squeaky bed and sheets damp due to frequent washes? This is what's good about virtuality: one can make the house's inner space as big as desired.

I walk towards the lantern light in the grass, my movements are slow and sluggish, drowsiness have almost retreated but the lead-heavy exhaustion have come instead.

I see the small house, either a good 'dacha' or a modest cottage, nobody around. The lantern shines lonesomely and sadly. For a moment it seems to me that merciful Madam decided to leave me alone. No, hardly. Compassion is one thing but the business is always on the first place.

I sit by the lantern – this is an antique kerosene lamp in net case. Those are used to descend underground. Into the deep.

The tiny moth circle around the lamp, bounce against the glass powerlessly trying to break into the light. Humans are much more stupid than the moth, they always manage to find a fire to burn their wings, that's why they are humans.

I don't hear the steps, just the hands lie on my shoulders, unsurely, shyly as if accustoming.

– Is it always so silent here? – I ask.

– No.

I shiver. Even her voice sounds familiar.

– It depends on the guests.

– I like silence, – I say, still not turning around.

– Me too, – she agrees, maybe in order to make a good impression on me, maybe sincerely.

I dare to turn around.

She looks just as on that picture. A short skirt, not a 'sexually' short one, just comfortable summer clothes, smoke grayish blouse, gray sandals on her feet, dark hair tied up with a narrow band on her forehead. The girl looks at me seriously, examining me as if I'm not the customer whom she has to serve but really just a guest whom she might accept or kick out into the night.

– I was called Gunslinger all day long today but you better call me Leonid.

She nods in agreement.

– And… if you don't mind, – I add. – If possible, I'll call you Vika.

The girl stays silent for so long that I decide that I have hurt her

accidentally. But finally she just asks:

– Why? Do I remind you somebody?

– Yes, – I confess. – I'll forget anyway and will call you by that name. Let's better avoid this.

– Okay, – she agrees sitting down by my side, outstretches her hands and warms them above the lantern as if above the fire, – I get used to names easily.

– Me too.

We sit in silence. I feel falling down slowly – deeper and deeper…

– Vika…

– Yes, Leonid?

– Will I look very stupid if I fall asleep now?

– I don't know, – she says, – Was it a hard day?

– The hard ones are still ahead.

– There's a bed in the house.. as you understand.

I nod. I don't want to stand up and leave alive silence for the dead one.

– But if you want, I'll bring you comforter.

– Thanks, this would be just great.

She rises and I gather remains of my strength.

Abyss, I'm not yours… let me go , Abyss…

Firstly, I went to the bathroom. Luckily the suit and the helmet have long enough wires. Then I lagged to the sofa and fell on it throwing the pillow aside: the head in the helmet is lifted high enough even without a pillow. My neck will grow numb by the morning, but I don't want to leave now.

– Vika, turn the deep on… – I whispered to Windows-Home. The colorful whirl follows and I'm in the deep again.

– What did you say? – Vika stands by me. The one that is alive… almost…

– No, nothing.

I take the comforter, spread it out on the grass and lie down. The girl sits by my side. I look up at the stars, they are so close, so alluringly bright. I lack just transparent light wings to fly up and crash against invisible glass…

– Vika, aren't you lonely here, in this nook?

– Why do you think it's a nook?

– The stars are too bright.

– No. I like it here…

She lies by my side and I shift on the comforter a little to give her more space.

– Do you like the sky? – asks Vika.

– Yes. I like to look at the stars. But I have no idea what their names are.

– Why would they need the names we give them… – Vika touches my hand.

– Look, the star have fallen. Just above us.

– We could go and search for it, – I say seriously. Vika doesn't answer right away and I understand with horror that I'll have to rise now.

– No, – she decides. – Your feet are failing you Gunslinger. We'll look for it in the morning. It'll just cool down by that time and it'll be possible to pick it up.

– It's too much light in the morning, – I note. – Better tomorrow in the evening.

– You're strange, – says the girl quietly. – Okay. Let's look for it tomorrow.

– Had you ever found a fallen star?

Vika stays silent but I can feel how she shakes her head.

– Virtuality took the sky from us, – I whisper.

– You understood it too?

– Of course. The world leaves into the deep, into reflection of reality. Why would one fly to the Moon or to Mars if any planet is reachable here and now? The passion have gone. The interest have gone too.

– But computer technologies are developing rapidly.

– Oh really? "Octium" is not more than just very cool "686"… – I purposefully call Pentium-Pro by unaccepted name. – Nothing new was invented in last five years, we are just marking time.

Vika laughs softly

– Oh geez… an argument about technological developments… Leonid, you're in the brothel, remember?

– I know… You're bored?

– No, but… I just have weaned of the talks like this…

She pauses then slightly touches my cheek with her lips.

– Sleep. You falter, Lenia.

I don't argue, I don't want to argue with her.

All the more, she is right.

I close my eyes and fall asleep – instantly.

110

I see a dream. I often see dreams – the consciousness gets so exhausted during the day that relief is absolutely necessary, it's what the dreams are for, to save us from overload of impressions, to finish what was left unsaid.

I don't remember my dreams usually, just messy remains whirl in my head, not completely understood. But now the dream is bright and imprints into consciousness, maybe because I sleep in virtuality.

I'm standing on the stage, the heavy curtains' cloth is behind me. There's a man with a guitar on the stage, he's motionless as if chained by invisible chains. He sings but the words don't reach me. It's the deep between us, the Deep that became alive, that turned into transparent wall. I strain myself trying to walk to him, to break the wall and to hear the words but the deep is heavy and resilient like a rubber slab. It throws me back, I fall on my knees and freeze, unable to move. The singer turns his head and looks at me. It seems that he starts to sing louder, but I can't hear him anyway. I'm chained by the deep, I'm swaddled, helpless.

The singer nods and turns away, I suddenly understand that this is Unfortunate from "Labyrinth", the one I have to save… to save instead of standing on my knees under invisible rubber heaviness.

But I have no strength anyway.

From the opposite side of the stage, from behind the curtains another man appears. He's dressed in camouflage overalls and has a shotgun in his hands, he looks at me, smirks and raises his weapon. This is Alex.

I shout, – NOOOO! – but the sound is bogged in the deep.

Alex shoots, the bullet breaks the guitar's neck, the strings scream curling up in elastic rings, the silence barrier breaks. I jump up, the heaviness disappeared. The singer looks at the dead guitar with surprise. Alex pulls the lock of his gun, I jump, knocking the singer down and blocking him by my body.

– I told that I'll make you, – says Alex.

He shoots, the bullet hits my chest, tears my heart into pieces, goes through and stabs the singer. His body shivers and becomes dead.

This means – it's over. This means – I was too late.

I rise and go to Alex. My heart doesn't beat anymore, but I don't care. I'm the diver, the only enemy of the deep, the guard between the worlds, the one who had to be here in time. I got used to live without heart, it's not that simple to kill me.

The audience roars behind my back, whistles and stamps their

feet.

– I've made you, – says Alex and lowers the shotgun.

Vika comes out from behind his back, outstretches her hand – there's greasy looking gray ash in it.

– I found that star, – she whispers and opens her hand.

The ash streams down to the floor circling in the air.

And then I die.

111

Awaken, I swallow the air greedily. The sun have risen already, the air is intoxicating fresh.

Vika sleeps, pressed against my shoulder, shrunk of the chill.

Very nice dream I've had indeed…

Like in that anecdote about Freud… "You know my dear daughter, sometimes there are JUST dreams…"

They say that it's a bad sign to sleep in virtuality.

– Vika… – I touch her shoulder, she shivers but doesn't wake up. I rise and cover her with the comforter. The lantern in the grass had went out. I go to the house.

It is small, just one luxury bedroom, a bathroom and a kitchen. I take cream, cheese and pate from the fridge, make coffee on the small stove, several sandwiches, put all that on the small tray and return back to Vika.

She's still sleeping.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours…

Well, not bad of a rest: 3 pm. I visited the bathroom, got myself into order, even brushed my teeth holding the helmet under arm, returned into the room, took a can of soda, yogurt and a piece of sausage from the fridge. A stupid combination but who cares what I eat in reality? The main thing is just to stuff the stomach.

The Vika on the computer monitor is dozing too. I felt the slight shame before the program whom I'm being unfaithful to with the human.

deep Enter.

I caress 'almost alive' Vika's hair and whisper, – Time to wake up…

She opens her eyes, looks at me in puzzlement, then smiles.

– Thanks.

– For what?

– Well… I had such a great rest. It doesn't happen often.

– I brought the breakfast.

– This is MY duty, – sighs Vika with imposed resentment, – Thank you, Leonid.

We drink coffee and eat sandwiches. Somewhere far in the forest the bird's voice rings.

– I had a bad dream, – informs Vika.

– About the stage? – I ask and my heart stops as if pierced by the bullet again.

– No, it was like I found the fallen star but it have already burnt. Utterly.

The heart shivers again, it echoes in the temples, hollowly and dully.

It's a bad sign to sleep in virtuality.

What links were between us, fallen asleep in the deep? Unheard whispers and sleepy grimaces, strained muscles and shaking eyelashes – everything was melted into electronic impulses and was transmitted through the deep.

To touch the one who was by my side.

Sleeping, just as me.

To slip into her dream.

It's a bad sign – to sleep in the deep.

– We'll look for it tomorrow, – I say. Vika looks at me ironically and asks:

– You're what, a millionaire's nephew?

I shrug.

– I want to see you again. Just to see you.

She hesitates before asking:

– Tell me… Don't I attract you?

– Sexually?

Vika nods.

– You do.

– Then… why?

– This shouldn't be so easy, – I also can't decide to finish at once, – And it should not be for sale.

– Lenia, you go crazy.

– Maybe.

– You even don't know who I am. This, – she raises her hands to her face, – is a mask. A make-up. I can be whoever.

I'm silent, you're surely right, I don't argue.

– I can be old in reality, – says Vika without mercy. – Or terribly ugly. Or perverted male. Do you understand?

I understand. It's doubtful about the male though…

– Don't be stupid, Lenia, don't fall in love with the mirage.

– I just want to see you again.

She decides finally.

– Come to "Amusements" and ask for Vika. Without 'order'. Okay?

– Won't Madam be angry?

– No.

– Okay, – I touch her hand. – Deal.

We finish coffee and sandwiches, Vika looks at me but says nothing.

Let her.

I rejoice inside. Inside I'm concentrated and business-like.

I'm a 20-year old again, flirting with the whimsical coeval. The

only difference is, the thought about the bed doesn't thrill me as much as then.

Together we leave the garden, exchanging meaningless phrases. The door stands right on the grass, reminding of the scene from some old kid's movie. Vika opens it and enters the brothel's corridor, I follow.

It's quiet and sad in there.

The customers never see each other. Come here everyone and find your cure..

– My time is over, – says Vika, – my timer will come up now.

I nod. It's pretty understandable, the timer is a holy thing.

– Thank you.

– What for?

– For the fallen star.

Looks like she wants to say something, but obviously her time was really up.

Vika dissolves in the air.

I whisper, – Bye… – and descend the stairs. There is another guard in the hall now, I wink to him and pad to the door, not waiting for the answer.

– Gunslinger!

I turn around.

Madam stands on the upper landing, leaning on the railing heavily.

– I think you shouldn't have come here, young man.

-Maybe, – I agree, – But it so happened.

Madam sighs and turns away. Let her.

I don't need Deep-Transit today, I still remember the route of yesterday's flight, and the exit from "Labyrinth" and the entrance are just five minutes apart.. I walk along ever-evening Deeptown's streets, looking around, expecting the ambush.

But either the pursuers' passion have exhausted since yesterday, or their finances had.

– I'm Gunslinger! – I shout entering the red fog in the portal. Others turn to me and I laugh raising my hands up to the lightning pierced arch, – I'm Gunslinger! Gunslinger!!!

1000

Today I've become the Death and the Death have become me.

This happens sometimes.

I cross "Labyrinth"'s levels almost without hiding, shooting the monsters and passing the other players. The players try to avoid me too. Except those who feel offended since yesterday or consider themselves heroes.

Those I kill.

I was killed myself twice too. At the first time I've lost all my weapons and was thrown back to the beginning of the 19th, the water level. The whole team had worked here, at least 20 people, I can't imagine what "Labyrinth"'s servers manage to coordinate actions of such a crowd.

I feel offended and kill them all, one by one, catching them in the swampy growth that covers the city's water reservoir, diving and dragging them under water where I could survive longer than any of them because of leaving virtuality. To the last of them, it was Tolik if I'm not mistaken, I cut the throat with the razor sharp leaf of the alien sedge. This is something new in "Labyrinth"'s program – the possibility to use improvised means.

Then I gather their gear and proceed forward.

On the 24th level, this is the bridge that connects industrial and residential blocks of the Twilight City, Alex catches up with me.

I'm finishing passing the bridge, the procedure that mostly requires the sense of balance and strong nerves than the ability to shoot well. Fortunately, I have the method proved back on the hair bridge of Al-Kabar.

The explosion bangs before me when I jump from the last slab that hangs over the chasm. The fiery whirl blossoms on the bridge, I'm thrown against the concrete parapet by the explosion blast.

Alex stands at the beginning of the level. When I look in the binoculars found in the main cache of the 20th level, I manage to examine him better. He has just a minimal gear – a carbine, a rocket launcher and a couple of first-aid kits.

– Gunslinger! – he shouts and waves his hand.

He has plenty of loads but doesn't shoot. I don't either.

– I'll make you pal! – he shouts, – Do you hear me? You're dead!

He follows me from the very first level and almost manages to catch up. Maybe he's a diver too, one more candidate for the Medal? My nerves start failing me, I leave the deep, catch Alex in the sight's mesh and launch three rockets one by one.

Somehow he manages to evade them and explosions thunder

behind his back, ripping into pieces some poor guy who just have entered the level. Alex is stunned too though, he squats and shakes his head trying to rise. I aim the launcher again but then lower it. The anger have passed.

– Cool down, you lamer! – I shout throwing the launcher behind my back and leave the level. If he's not a diver, he'll get stuck on the bridge for quite long.

The monsters get to use me well on the 31st level. It's at least a couple of hundreds of them here, beginning with the weak and dumb mutants and ending with the scum flying, jumping and digging into the ground and asphalt.

I'm standing at the beginning of the level for approximately seven minutes – this is the skyscraper's lobby and shoot the cheerfully gathering monsters. Carbine shells are over as well as the rockets. I throw away the useless weapons. I'm being wounded twice and have to use several first-aid kits.

The lobby's window cracks and the half transparent muzzle shoves inside. Other monsters keep running in.

I take the plasma gun from my shoulder and open fire. I have lots of energy cells, so far saving the most powerful weapon available.

The level is burning. Blue lightning bolts of my shots ruin the storeys together with monsters and other players. I burn the whole block down to the ground.

The monsters calm down. I move through the wreckage.

Several attacks more, much weaker this time.

I leave the level being empty. Very, very nasty level. The monsters are far less smart than the people despite any programmers' efforts, but they suppress by their numbers.

I was instantly killed on the 32nd level. There was a guy with winchester at the entrance and he shot me point-blank. I don't have any ammunition, I try to run towards my enemy to beat him to death with brass-knuckles, but three bullets in a row blast the remains of life out of me.

I begin the level again from scratch, without the armor and with just a single gun, as usual.

Blacked out with rage, I shoot the bastard approaching him is zig-zags, he drops his winchester and falls backwards. I start hitting his head against the asphalt, with each blow shaking out one percent of strength. He doesn't even defend himself, just mumbling cheerfully:

– I killed Gunslinger! I killed Gunslinger…

I take all his weapons – he had too little unfortunately, and leave the half dead idiot for the monsters to lacerate.

The good thing is, this level – "shopping mall" – is pretty easy, a little break for those who survived the 'mincer' of the previous one. It's

long rows of supermarkets and small shops… if one doesn't go too far into them, there's no particular danger.

I obtain the carbine, the rocket launcher, the armor vest and some ammo. Then, not getting into fights, I proceed to the exit.

To Unfortunate… damn him.

When I enter the Disneyland (the blood stained doll and a pile of little bones by the cheerful entrance), I start thinking that Unfortunate could have been saved already. This would be funny.

But Unfortunate is still here.

I look around for some time to remember the surroundings. When I passed "Labyrinth" for the last time, this amusement park was not here. The 33rd level was unpleasant but quite standard.

Unfortunate sits by the fence of "Russian Hills", huddled up… I still prefer to call them "American Hills". From one side he's covered by the elegant booth with the ride control mechanisms, from the other – by the wall that encircles all "Disneyland". A comfortable place, it's impossible to stalk him unnoticed. I would hide here too.

But not for so long anyway, not for more than two days.

I approach Unfortunate openly, raising empty hands. He doesn't react. Maybe he's sleeping.

Maybe he's dead.

Death in virtuality is quite an unpleasant thing. I saw one such corpse… the most horrible thing was that it was "alive" – continued to walk along the street, colliding with passers by, shaking, repeating last convulsions of its unlucky owner. He was shut down manually, after two hours of his channel tracing. Nasty thing is it – the dead body walking in the street…

But Unfortunate shivers and raises his head.

– Privet! – I shout – Hello! Ne strelyaj! Don't shoot!

He doesn't answer, but doesn't rise the gun from his knees either.

– I came to help you! – I hear the rustle behind my back and turn around. Some guy with the plasma gun looks at me in shock.

I wave my finger at him and nod – go on.

It's not necessary to convince him, he recognized Gunslinger and is not very eager to compete in keenness.

– Let's talk! – I say approaching Unfortunate, – Okay? I'm your friend! Go steady!

Looks like he doesn't want anything, neither to befriend, nor to shoot me.

I squat by his side, outstretch my hand and carefully take the gun from him. He doesn't resist.

– Do you understand me? – I almost shout. And Unfortunate condescends to answer.

His lips move and I more guess than hear: "Yes…" { *in this case* –

in Russian } At least something. The compatriot…

– Are you here for long? – I ask carefully. Interesting, have he lost the sense of time already?

He nods. At least this he does understand.

– Is your timer on?

No reaction.

I shake his shoulder and repeat:

– Did you turn the timer on? Is the timer on?

Unfortunate shakes his head. Uh-oh. The worst case. I turn around – most likely Guillermo watches me, and shout:

– You see? He can't exit by himself! Trace his channel!

I don't quite believe in the success of this though. Thus, I'll have to drag Unfortunate to the end of the level and convince or force him to push the exit button there.

Though, it's nothing impossible in this.

– Now we'll stand up and go, – I say softly, as if talking to the little kid. Although, he surely might be one who managed to seize upon the desired toy in his parents' absence. This happened before. – Can you walk?

An unsure nod.

– Let's rest, – I understand that I talk nonsense, Unfortunate 'rests' here for more than 30 hours already but I go on: – We'll rest, eat and go forward. There'll be nothing terrible anymore. I'll lead you.

I take off my mask-helmet, the air is clean enough on this level and open the package with food. I give him a huge sandwich and a can of soda. The virtual food won't help his body but will give him a fake vivacity in the deep.

I take a bite, chew and look at Unfortunate. He just sits with the sandwich in his hand.

Yeah. A hard case. I wish I came here a day earlier.

– Eat, – I urge him. I outstretch my hand and take his mask off. The red oval from the respirator stays on his face. Otherwise, it's a pretty nice face, a normal, not a standard one: the blond young guy, just his eyes are tired and dim. – Come on! – I encourage him.

He raises the sandwich to his mouth and starts chewing slowly. Good. A piece for Mommy, a piece for Daddy, a piece for Uncle Diver… Maybe he's really just a little kid?

– My name is Gunslinger. What's yours? – I ask. He doesn't answer, too busy with his food. – How old are you?

The last question is a serious offence. Everyone is equal in virtuality. If he has at least a little experience in Deeptown life, he'll certainly answer… Oh, HOW will he answer…!

But he's silent.

Hard work is ahead.

Well, the prize isn't small either. I wouldn't ever exchange it for precious "Labyrinth"'s half a million. It's impossible to buy the Medal of Complete License – a single case like this would immediately ruin it's value.

– Feel better? – I ask Unfortunate. He nods. – Very good. Stand up.

He raises submissively and I return him his gun. This is not more than just a symbolic weapon on 33rd level, but at least he'll feel himself more confident. I really want to believe in this.

– And now let's go, calmly and confidently.

I'm an idiot.

I forgot about the 'grabber' demon around the corner, forgot how Guillermo demonstrated it to me. I walk along the "American Hill"'s fence, stepping like in the parade.

And surely the demon grabs me cheerfully with his long hand, rakes me up and raises into the air. The demon looks like a stomp, covered with tentacles… baobab's stomp most likely. The toothy mouth is in the center of it, strong seven fingered paw grows from the butt, now turning me over in the air, kneading, turning me into an accurate, one-bite meatball.

The Unfortunate's gun whispers: "Tak-tak-tak", shooting the charger out at the monster.

Hanging in the air, I have time to be amazed by his strange posture: the body bent forward, his shoulders drawn back, the gun is in outstretched left hand.

It's impossible to kill the demon with this weapon.

But the paw suddenly stops breaking my ribs, weakens and I fall from the three meters height right down into the greedily opened gob.

To my great luck, the monster can't chew and swallow anymore. I scramble out of the stinking hole trying not to look at the teeth at least ten centimeters long. There are shreds of clothes on them. Not mine.

I'm covered with saliva and it hisses on my armor vest. I wipe myself with tufts of yellow dry grass, then pad to Unfortunate. He's relaxed, sluggish and barely alive again.

It appears so…

– Thanks, – I mutter, press the first-aid kit to the hand, it clicks injecting the medications and disintegrates. Pretty well was I crumpled.

– You're welcome, – Unfortunate says quietly but clearly. Though, this name doesn't quite fit him anymore. To kill the demon with a gun!

Theoretically it's possible though. "Labyrinth"'s creators declared many times that one can kill any monster with a gun or even by the

brass-knuckles. Theoretically. If one knows one single super-vulnerable point on the monster's body.

But I haven't heard about such deeds yet.

I drop the winchester from my shoulder and give it to Unfortunate. He takes the weapon melancholically.

I'm armed with the launcher. It's only four loads there, but we'll try to get more now.

– What is your name? – I ask.

No answer.

What the hell… let you be Unfortunate then.

"Disneyland" is made beautifully. I Dunn whether it copies any real park or only embodies the fantasy of game designers. But the monsters riding the view wheel, throwing the fireballs at each other must have been born in somebody's sick mind. The sight is so amusing that I look at it for a couple of minutes before shooting a rocket at the wheel's pivot. Explosion and it falls on it's side slowly. Debris flies at least 20 meters high.

I look at Unfortunate askance: will he appreciate the show?

Not in a freaking bit.

– Let's go, – I growl. Looks like I start to get used to my silent companion.

We pass the water rides. There's blood in the pools instead of water. Some boats sliding along the purple smooth are filled with sitting skeletons, others are empty. The nasty shrilling screech is heard – mechanisms were not made to work in this type of liquid.

Disgusting.

And over there – the whole family of mutants: two adults and three little ones in bright flower patterned dresses, made themselves comfortable for the picnic. On the small gas stove they fry a piece of leg in leather boot. I waste one more rocket. They don't even try to run: those are not a fighter monsters but ones created just to pump up the dread.

I wish I could find the one who created all this vileness and kick his ass. Not in virtuality.

– We'll soon be there, – I say to Unfortunate. – You do pretty good.

He nods, as if with slight gratitude. Why did "Labyrinth"'s divers waste so much time?

The guy proceeds great.

Together we deflect the attack of the flock of petty flying monsters. Unfortunate shoots sparingly and keenly, leather wings break, clumsy bodies fall down and burst.

– Let's go, – I say.

It's only by the big concrete field with small cars sliding along it

where the little delay happens.

There's a little kid in one of the cars, a little black boy. He steers trying to dodge from three mutants that drive him across the field with screeching laughter. Once the kid passes close to the fence glancing at us with utter terror.

Unfortunate raises his carbine.

– This is not a player, – I explain tiredly. – This is a part of the program. Some bonus points. You rescue the child, take him to the safe place and get some weapon or an armor as a bonus. Let's go, no need to waste the time.

But Unfortunate had obviously lost the contact with reality completely. He starts shooting.

Three shots – three mutants. They try to fight back throwing fireballs at us but Unfortunate is quicker and much more keen.

The giant spider crawls out from somewhere attracted by shooting sounds and starts pouring on us the bursts from the machine gun implanted into his muzzle. I have to meddle. Two rockets – under the cat's tail { *wasted. ;-P* }… more precisely: under the spider's mandibles.

The silence falls, just the kid who have got out of the car squats and cries.

– Let's go, – I decide. Now nothing is left but to bring the kid to the shelter and take the well earned ammunition.

We walk through the fence torn by machine gun fire and pad to the boy. I lag slightly, pick at the spider's remains with my foot trying to figure out whether it's possible to use his machine gun.

Slime, chitin and iron debris. Nothing to look for.

Unfortunate approaches me holding the kid in his hands carefully and I feel sympathy to him involuntarily. He's a fool, turned off the timer and got lost in the deep, but he's a nice guy after all.

– Where are your parents? – I ask the boy hoping that the proggy is not too complicated and I won't have to waste the time for persuasion and care. The boy silently points at the building nearby. Thanks God…

We approach the building, I keep the launcher ready, Unfortunate is not battle-worthy.

The entrance looks suspicious to me, the door is torn from its hinges and screeches, even if there's no wind. Behind it is full darkness. Windows are covered with blue moss from inside.

– There? – I ask. The boy nods. I raise my foot above the threshold.

– I'm sorry… – the boy whispers clearly, – they said that they'll let Mommy go if I…

In the last instant I manage to jump back and the jet of fire misses

me. Something is heavily moving inside the building and rolls on the floor. I launch my last rocket in there.

An explosion bangs, but sounds only become louder after it. The boy screams, breaks free from Unfortunate's hands who tries to hold him, but the kid scratches his face, slips down and rushes into the door.

– Mommy!!! – his thin scream can be heard followed by the muffled champ and the silence falls.

– What a nice walk for beer it was… – I mumble dragging Unfortunate by the shoulder out from the building. He seems to be ready to storm inside after the boy, right into the welcoming gob of the unknown monster.

– Why? – he whispers, turning to me, – Why did he do this?

It's useless to explain him the logic of "Labyrinth"'s creators, he obviously takes everything what's going on seriously.

– They forced the boy to lure the passers by into the ambush, – I say,

– They threatened to kill his mother. That's why he submitted.

Unfortunate stays quite for some time as if thinking over my words. Then asks:

– And why did he rush inside?

At least now my ward have become a little more talkative.

– He was afraid for his mother.

– We need to help them, – says Unfortunate gripping the carbine more comfortably.

He's definitely ready to crawl even in the devil's gob.

– They're already dead! – I shout, – They have perished, believe me!

He believes and lowers the weapon. Thanks God he doesn't insist on revenge for the poor kid.

We go further.

I have an empty launcher, the Unfortunate's winchester has 10 loads at the most. Aren't we armed great?… What a beautiful walk.. And when I notice the guy standing in some 100 meters from us with the corner of my eye, my mood becomes even more lousy.

– Knock him off, – I command. Unfortunate turns to me in surprise.

– Why?

Sure. If he believes in reality of events he would never shoot at people. What a nice guy.

– Give me the weapon! – I insist, looking at the stranger intently. Is it Alex or not? Gee, how I need my binoculars now…

– No! – says Unfortunate firmly and hides the winchester behind his back.

I even don't want to argue with him, I just stand and watch the alien. He studies us too for some time, then steps behind the building's corner and vanishes.

Looks like it wasn't Alex.

– Let's go, my grief you…

In half an hour our situation improves a little. The purple clouds in the sky disappear opening the evil Southern sun. We're almost near the exit from Disneyland. Unfortunate managed to deflect the attack of two spider-like monsters, I find the loads for the launcher and the plasma gun with one energy cell. The life becomes better.

We take a break in the shade of the ruined pizzeria. This time I don't have to ask Unfortunate to eat. He chews the last sandwich very concentrated, I watch him. I don't need food, but at least he could offer to share it, lamer…

– Why did you want to kill that man? – asks Unfortunate.

I don't dare to tell him that his gear would be useful for us.

– He could attack us.

– No. Dick is good.

– Dick?

– Yes. He tried to help me. This morning.

My brains screech in strain.

So, one of "Labyrinth"'s divers watches us? Without interference, without offering help. All this is odd.

– Is Anatol good too? – I launch a probe.

Unfortunate shakes his head energetically, but doesn't try to explain the reasons for his dislike towards the second diver.

– What about me? – this becomes interesting. Unfortunate stops chewing and thinks.

– I don't know yet, – he concludes. Then adds in apologetic tone, – Most likely, good.

It's better not to stop the talk. I carefully take Unfortunate's hand and say:

– Do you understand that everything around is virtual reality?

– Yes.

Perfect. This is half of success.

– Hey kid… What is your name?

– I can't say, – he confesses with obvious regret.

– Are you sure?

– I can't.

– Kid, you're in virtuality for one and a half day already. this is much, very much. Your body is tired, it requires rest, food, water…

I really hope that my voice sounds insinuatingly, like hypnotizer's.

– I need to exit, – he agrees.

– I'll help you, – I promise again, – We're already close. but if

something goes wrong, it'll be easier to help you by other means.

Unfortunate swallows the remains of sandwich and looks at me questionably.

– Tell me your Net address, – I ask, – "Labyrinth" will inform your providers, they will send a guy who will eject you from the deep manually. There's nothing shameful in this, I swear, it can happen to anybody.

– No, this is impossible.

– Listen to me… If you are so shy about what happened, or fear something… I'll personally come to you. Wherever you might be. I'm a private party. I don't care about "Labyrinth". I just want to solve your problem! Do you believe me?

– Yes.

– Then tell me the address… – for a moment I think that I've won. I'm really ready to jump out of the deep, to buy the plane ticket and go to Unfortunate's home, even to the Sakhalin [Island] or to Magadan.

– No.

Annoyed, I hit the wall and hurt the finger bones.

– Then stand up! – I command.

The exit from Disneyland is made inside the mirror labyrinth. The labyrinth inside "Labyrinth"… I start feeling dizzy imagining this inclusion of virtual spaces.

– Okay… – I say when we pass the stone statue of the moustached old man with the pile of some sort of ad brochures in granite fingers. The statue watches exiting players sadly. – I'll go in front of you. You'll keep close behind, okay? And try to notice the enemy first, you have keen eyes.

– All right, – says Unfortunate.

We enter the mirror labyrinth. In the beginning it's just a corridor with mirror walls, then it begins to branch, alternating with columns and I lose orientation completely. There's ten pairs of divers and Unfortunates around me. The world breaks into pieces, rotates and flows.

Shit.

It's absolutely different from the mirror labyrinths they like to show in cheap sci-fi movie tales. It's impossible to confuse reality and illusion, no matter how directors try.

Here it's no difference.

I think about leaving the deep, though it'll not help: the detailed illusion will be replaced with the schematic one, that's all.

– Careful, Unfortunate! – I warn, mechanically calling him by the name invented by Guillermo.

He doesn't protest.

We wander in the labyrinth for twenty minutes and finally enter the big hall.

It's a mirror one also: 13-edge prism. Computers are installed along the walls. It's the exit!

And just under the ceiling there are small balconies where monsters stand in pairs. I haven't seen those before – big bulging eyes, long hands holding carbines firmly, scaly bodies.

Except this, they're quite human-like.

– Get back! – I shout, and Unfortunate seems to try to jump back into the mirror corridor.

But at this moment monsters open fire.

Bullets pierce the mirror floor, sharp needles stick into my body. I shoot at random at one of the balconies, clearly understanding that only one of them is real, all others are just reflections.

The fiery whirl, the hall overcasts with a smoke. The shots are thundering, my right hand is wounded, I jerk with pain, throw the heavy tube of the launcher at the left shoulder. I don't even have time to exit virtuality.

And Unfortunate rushes back.

We stand side by side, shooting at the damned mirrors and they shatter with mocking jingle. I'm wounded one more time, scream but continue shooting.

The last rocket doesn't find its aim too, I throw the launcher up, at one of the still intact balconies, hit it – the glass!… – grab the plasma gun and make the hard choice between the last two targets.

Wrong choice.

The blue fiery blast hits the dimming mirror.

The energy cell is empty.

One of the monsters is dead, either hit by the shot or just badly cut by the shattering glass. But the second one continues shooting. His carbine is aimed straight at me and he hits the trigger.

Unfortunate covers me with his body.

The whole volley hits him and he sinks down. The monster recharges his carbine, quickly, with experience…. and I stand frozen, unable to comprehend what happened. And anyway, I don't have anything to answer with, I don't have any loads.

The shot thunders right above my shoulder, deafening me. The fiery sphere flashes on the balcony, burning the monster down to ashes, splashing tenacious threads of charges in all directions trying to find any other target.

BFG-9000.

The weapon that I failed to get in my hurry rush through the levels.

I even don't look who was shooting and bend down to

Unfortunate.

His face is a bloody mask, the chest is torn by the bullets but he's still alive – five farewell seconds given by the game.

– Reflection… – he whispers.

I wipe the blood from his face and rise.

The husky guy in full armor stands behind me, weapons hang on him like ornaments on the Xmas tree. His face is dry and calm, breathing filter pulled down on his chin.

– It's hard to kill the Alien Prince's escort guards. – he says. The voice is quiet but one can feel boiling emotions under this calmness.

– You're the diver… – I say.

– You too.

The armored giant doesn't look like the guy who was watching us before.

– Anatol'?

He nods and I remember divers' courtesy rules.

– Leonid, – I introduce myself.

"Labyrinth"'s diver nods, throwing the bulky "BFG-9000" on his shoulder.

Most likely we had met at some gathering, he just was in some other body, as well as I was though.

Anatol' pads to the Unfortunate's body, looks into his face and nods again.

– As always.

He slightly kicks him as if making sure that Unfortunate is really dead.

And then I hit him on the face, hit so hard that Anatol is thrown against the wall.

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Dick, the second "Labyrinth"'s diver, whom Unfortunate called a 'nice guy', is the one who pulls us apart.

We fight for around five minutes, without intention to kill each other, just venting out the rage and hate. Dick pushes the barrel of his "BFG-9000" between our bodies and informs quietly:

– Three more hits and I shoot.

Anatol looks at him askance, lets me go and then hits me under the ribs in a short blow. I catch my breath and kick him in the groin. Now it's Anatol's turn to writhe in pain.

Dick calmly waits for the third hit but we stand still.

– Good, – decides Dick lowering his weapon. He speaks Russian, clearly and almost without accent, – D-divers… motherf***ers.

– This imbecile lamer… – hisses Anatol, – This asshole…

– Cool down, – advises Dick. – He went well, I was watching. Not always honestly, but always well.

Dick is not high, lean and lithe, but in this pair he's the boss. Anatol calms down and starts wiping the blood from his face. I get busy with the same.

– You played well, – says Dick, – but everything isn't that simple.

– I understood that, – I agree shifting my gaze from the Unfortunate's body, – What's going on?

– Explain him, An, – throws Dick out and sits on smoked shattered glass of the floor.

Anatol winces as if was asked to eat a handful of leeches but submits himself.

– Did you weirdo really think we're playing the fool here? – he asks.

– You know better, – I growl.

– We try to drive him out every hour! – screams Anatol, – I led him seven times! And Dick – eight times! Do you understand, dumbass? We know every corner here! We can smell when something changes! Understand?

I start to understand.

– Had Guillermo told you that we're trying to pull the guy out? – asks Dick in a dull voice.

– Yes, – I sniffle with my broken nose.

– Great! – cheers up Dick, – Then why the… – he swallows the swear and just waves his hand tiredly.

– Who is this guy for you? – asks Anatol looking at me with a heavy gaze.

– Who?

– Unfortunate! – shouts Anatol'. He obviously wants to kick the body one more time to illustrate his words but stops just in time. – Your brother? Your brother in law? Who is he? You're what, in really dire straits that signed for doing our job?

– Well, I can see how YOU do it.

– Anatol' asked right, – notes Dick, – Who is he for you?

– Nobody.

– Listen man, if you know his address, it's better to drag Unfortunate out manually.

– I don't know his address, – I say, – Can you believe me? This is just a customer. I was hired to save him.

– By whom?

– I don't know either. The guy had no face.

I watch their reaction, but there's none. They took my phrase about Man Without Face as a figure of speech.

– No better, – says Dick.

– No easier, – Anatol' mechanically corrects him, – No easier. { *The Russian saying was here… Impossible to translate adequately. :-/* }

– Thanks, – Dick looks at me askance, – What's your name, man?

– Leonid.

Dick nods.

– You know me as Crazy Tosser. { *same in Russian original* } I just blink. Crazy Tosser is one of the oldest and respected divers, an aged cheerful pot-bellied guy… at least he has this appearance on the gatherings. So this is where Crazy earns his living…

– Guys, I ain't gonna take over your job, – I say. – I have a definite request – to rescue Unfortunate. I couldn't refuse.

Both divers soften instantly. Looks like yesterday's stir and my headlong journey through "Labyrinth"'s levels have planted certain apprehension into their minds.

– You're doomer, right? – asks Anatol' – One of the old ones…

– Yes.

– Oh well… You were going fine… – says Anatol' turning away. – I heard the stories. Even if a half of those is bull…

– Thanks, – I say. Nice words are pleasant even for a newbie… { *remake of another Russian saying…. ;-) It gets harder…* }

– It's impossible to save Unfortunate, – says Dick.

– What? – I feel lost.

– Impossible.

– Dick is our fatalist, – smirks Anatol, – Okay. Sit down, I'll explain.

We sit around the Unfortunate's body and Anatol' starts his story. I listen, skipping details and remembering the main facts.

Unfortunate doesn't tell his name and address.

Unfortunate is a perfect shooter… and would he be more lucky he could pass "Labyrinth" in one day and get all the prizes.

Unfortunate never shoots at other players.

– What? – I ask.

– What you've heard. He doesn't shoot at the players. He kills the monsters in a snap, -mutters Anatol, – One feels envious seeing it… But he didn't shoot at humans even once. When I was dragging him out for the first time, it was the thing why I failed. I was sure he'll help…

– He "flows"… – I say – He considers what's going on real… well no! He said it himself that it's virtuality around…

– Um-hmm, – agrees Anatol – He didn't lose orientation but the humanism is his quirk.

– Religion? – I guess, – Pacifist?

Anatol just shrugs.

– So it were the players who killed him each time?

– The fate killed him, – Dick enters the talk, – He was killed by players, by monsters, by ruined ceiling, by ricochet, he drowned in melted asphalt and fell down from the height. Fifteen deaths, all different.

– It's impossible, – I note. – Unless he does it himself.

– If he's suicidal, then he must be very-very cunning, – Dick doesn't agree, – Everything looks like an accident. It's just too many accidents already.

– Dick thinks it's his karma, – says Anatol – He had earned this fate somehow. And whatever we do, it's impossible to get him out.

– Crazy, this is bull, – I say. Dick just smiles, – Guys, isn't there ANY mean to shut the player down forcefully? Without knowing his address?

"Labyrinth"'s divers look at each other.

– Don't hide it, – I beg, – It's serious..

– There was a method, – confesses Dick. – Anatol have tried it.

I look at Anatol waiting for explanations.

– Thirteen deaths in a row, – he answers reluctantly, – If the player perishes thirteen times in a row with interval of less than five minutes, the program kicks him out without notice. This is a barrier for absolute dummies.

I still don't understand.

– I tried it this morning, – says Anatol, – I haven't drag Unfortunate through the level, just stood at the beginning of it and started to kill him. Thirteen times, then two times more, I thought that I did a mistake in count. And nothing happened!

– Stop! – shouts Dick jumping up, – Leonid, one more step and I'll kill you. This is a game, understand?

I retreat from Anatol. Dick is right, one can't measure what's going on in "Labyrinth" with the real world's or even Deeptown's measures. This is deep within the deep.

– How did he respond? – I ask.

– I explained everything to him before! – Anatol hardly refrains himself too, – Don't think I enjoy that! I explained everything, was shooting at his head with the carbine. I thought maybe he'll resist somehow, but in the beginning he tried to hide, then just sat and waited!

Now it's clear why Unfortunate thinks so about him.

– Leonid, it's a game, – repeats Dick. – On the 17th level you had to shoot the boy tied to the tunnel door in order to pass. Did you do it?

Sure I did, it was impossible to untie him…

– That was just a program Dick, a drawing and a sound file. It prevented me from getting to the real guy.

– And how many people did you shoot in the first day earning reputation? – shouts Anatol,– And don't tell me about fair fight! You're the doomer of the old training, you're diver! All "Labyrinth"'s heroes don't have even a half of your abilities in a fight! You can jump out of the Deep and not feeling any pain! You can shoot like being in the shooting-range! You can walk along the wire as a rope-walker!

He silences and frowns, – Was Al-Kabar your work?

I nod.

– Beautifully done… – Anatol calms down as fast as he fires up, – So listen up, Leonid. We won't interfere in your business. Make a try. But don't vent out on us! We're doing our own job.

– And now it's our turn, – adds Dick. – Return in six hours. If we don't get the guy out by that time, it'll be your turn again.

I don't argue. They are hosts, I'm the guest. I rise and walk to the computer by the wall.

– Hey Leonid! – shouts Anatol' behind, – Do you know why you couldn't kill those escort guards at once?

I shake my head.

– The programs can cheat too. Wherever you shoot, only the last target will be the real one.

Well, thanks for info… I touch the keyboard and save my result.

– In six hours! – says Dick behind my back, – Not earlier!

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This time it's much less people in the column hall, but still around 10 people stand sipping beer and obviously waiting for me.

I go past them.

– Gunslinger!

I turn around. Two unfamiliar guys and long haired girl come towards me.

– I'm Gunslinger, – I agree.

– Who are you? – asks stooping guy with glasses. Many people pick such peaceful looking appearances to distract the vigilance of their rivals.

Looks like it'll be no fights with shooting today. Very good; yesterday everybody were pissed but their minds cooled down a bit as of late.

– This is not important.

– Gunslinger, what do you want? – the girl joins the talk, – Are you just playing?

– No.

– What do you want then? You were seen on the 33rd level all day. Are you stuck?

– No.

Delegation makes no headway, then the guy in glasses raises his hands.

– Peace Gunslinger?

– Okay, – I reply puzzled.

– People fear to go through the 33rd – he explains, – About half hundred of them gathered on the 32nd. Gunslinger, if you won't purposefully shoot the players, they won't touch you too. Otherwise the big hunt is gonna be declared, and not only in the Twilight City.

– Very good, – I agree, – But one condition… there is a guy with the pistol on the very beginning of the level. He must not be touched too.

The guy in glasses and the girl glance at each other.

– Deal, Gunslinger.

We shake hands.

– Let's go to "BFG"? – suggests the girl.

The deals are usually celebrated with beer, and I have six free hours anyway, so I nod. The rest of the group joins us and we leave the column hall in a dense group. I look around – either Alex is not among my companions or he hides in the different body.

– Guys, if anybody breaks the deal and attacks me…

– It'll be your and his problems, – confirms the guy in glasses.

– Great.

– Gunslinger, are you doomer? – asks the girl.

– Yes.

– Maybe yet played on the 'threes' { *386* }?

– On 'twos'.

– 'Doom'? On the 'two'? – asks the guy in glasses ironically.

– Sure not. 'Wolfstein'.

The crowd buzzes approvingly, most of them had only heard about the most primitive of 3D games.

– By the way, – says the girl, – I've recently met a guy, he entered Deeptown from the 'three'.

– What?! – the guy in glasses looks shocked.

– What you heard. As is, without the helmet or suit. He said he's a drafted sergeant, sits somewhere in tundra on the space communications station. Their equipment would just fit a museum, but they have a connection to the Internet through some military local server. He installed deep-program on 386-DX, entered Deeptown through some gate and ventured into the city. I noticed him because of his gait, shaky and jerky, obviously due to a crappy modem.

– Bull, – the guy in glasses shakes his head, – it's impossible to get into virtuality on the 'three'.

– Why not? Quite possible, if with 'sopr'. – objects somebody.

A long argument starts, about whether it's possible or not to enter virtuality on IBM-386 and whether the math coprocessor will help in this process. I just listen but don't meddle, even if I know the answer.

It's possible.

I started with the 'three' myself, also without helmet or suit, just like that hypothetical soldier in the most unusual leave in history. But this information is not for giving away.

In the meantime, the hall livens up. The guy with the guitar appears from somewhere, swarthy and long-haired. He smiles shyly, waves his hand and steps into the green substance which hisses under his feet. Then he walks into the center of the green zone, sits on the chair that stands on the small concrete patch and starts tuning his guitar without a hurry. I wave back to him, even if he can't recognize me in the Gunslinger's image. This is a legendary person in the Deep, one of the old hackers, and also – the bard. Our paths didn't cross for a very long time. He usually sings in "Three Piglets", where he even has a small share as they say. He's quite indifferent to "Labyrinth" and the fact of his being here is a rare luck. The singer brushes his hair off his forehead and starts singing.

The girl claps her hand against the table following the rhythm, the beer flows like a river. I get to know all the company, making Vika to remember all faces and names just in case. Using my distraction,

one of them shakes my hand for the long time and sticks a primitive marker onto my shoulder. I pretend that I doesn't notice anything, hug the guy in a burst of friendliness and throw the marker back at him.

Go ahead and trace me now, lamer.

The fun reaches its peak, everybody's happy, including the smart lamer.

My head is already full with intoxicating fog, I stand up and smile to the players, – I have to go.

Nobody asks why or tries to make me stay longer. Being in the Deep isn't a free fun. I make my way among the tables, imaginary cubes hiss above my head, opening and spitting out monsters. I force myself not to duck.

I have around 5 more hours. Now "Labyrinth"'s divers are busy with Unfortunate, but for some reason I'm sure they'll fail.

Turning into the alley, I stop. Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours….

As a first thing after getting the helmet off, I opened the fridge, took out the soda, sausage and yogurt. It's time for lunch.

Everything is quiet on the screen. Gunslinger stands propped against the wall, rare passers-by don't pay attention to him. Some queer fellow whisks into "Amusements"' door.

– Hey, not to Vika! – I said following him.

– I haven't understood you Lenia, – replied Windows-Home.

– Never mind, – I said hiding my eyes, – Everything's okay.

I start feeling uncomfortable suddenly, what if somebody have come to that, virtual Vika? I imagined myself starting the fight in the nonexistent brothel and smiled but began to eat much faster anyway.

– Lenia, – said Windows-Home, – I must do my monthly reminders to you.

– Fire away, – I growl.

– To call your parents, – reproachfully says Vika, – I can dial the number, but this will require the phone line to be freed…

– No.

Not very nice of course, but I better call them in the evening.

– To pay your utilities.

Yeah, it's better not to postpone that. They can shut down the phone line in the least desirable moment…

– Thanks.

– To clean the apartment.

I looked around quickly. Yup, it'd be great to wash the floor and to wipe the dust and to paint the rusty central heating unit.

– Thanks Vika, acknowledged.

– Also, one more time I draw you attention to the fact that the level of the given tasks doesn't always correspond to the capacity of my RAM…

– Shut up.

I put my hands on the keyboard, pushed the empty yogurt carton down to the floor so that it wouldn't hinder me.

deep Enter I glue off of the wall, enter brothel's glass doors and Madam comes out to meet me.

– You're early today Gunslinger.

– Well, at least not for long this time.

Madam smiles and strokes my cheek.

– Just don't take the girls in.

– I'll try, – I reply with a voice of well behaving kid.

Madam nods, not really sure and turns to the guard:

– Escort him to the service area. To Vika.

– Thanks a lot! – I say from all my heart. Madam waves her hand tiredly and goes to the stairs. The guard nods at the little door that he stands by.

With a little confusion I follow him, into the very heart of the brothel.

There's a clean corridor, the summer forest behind the windows, the river and the bright sun. Heh, but Madam said it's always evening here… still want some sun, don't you?

The row of doors along the corridor, no names or numbers on them but the pictures instead. Kittens, puppies, mice, hares… It reminds a kindergarten a little, but a half naked blonde suddenly looks out of one of the doors, oys, vividly covers her breasts and jumps back inside.

I try to keep the straight face. There are rustles behind the doors when I pass them, the light noise can be heard. I know that if I turn around I'll see a dozen curious faces looking into the corridor. That's why I don't turn.

The guard stops by the door with a thoughtful black kitten on it and knocks.

– Yes? – I hear the voice that I instantly recognize and start slightly.

– A visitor, – replies the guard.

– Let him enter.

The guard taps me on my shoulder slightly and walks away. He's asked in whispers about something from half opened doors, but doesn't reply.

I enter, followed by the mocking gaze of the kitten.

The room looks like a hut in the mountains. The window is opened and the gusts of chilly wind enter the room, the noise of the river can be heard. Vika sits on the simple wooden chair by the window, studying her face in the little mirror, the quite up-to-date cosmetic set is on the table nearby.

– Hi, – she says, – Sit here quietly for a little bit, okay?

I nod and look around. There are watercolors on the walls, unfamiliar ones, almost all of them show the mountains, the fog and pine trees. They seem monotonous at the first glance, like creations of a hack-worker, prepared for the weekly sale but I look closer and nod in approval, these are not a 'stamping' made by experienced hand but rather a series.

– How would you call them? – asks Vika without turning around. It's nice to have a mirror.

– I Dunn, – I confess, – I always had problems with names. Well, for instance…

I pass along the walls, touching frames carefully. The mountains or maybe just one mountain but at different points of view, dense lashes of the fog, pine trees stuck to the slopes. The morning chill and dry liquid air. The ringing stream, rustles of wind, as if the picture can make sounds.

– Labyrinth, – I say, – Labyrinth of reflections.

Vika makes-up her lips ans agrees thoughtfully:

– Maybe… The main thing: it's vague. They buy better with such names.

– These are your pictures?

I'm amazingly slow minded lately.

– Yes. Doesn't look like that?

– It does. But I just thought you selected them with good taste.

– Geez, men… – Vika stands up at last. She is dressed in the white linen knee-long dress, sandals, the silver pendant hangs on a chain from her neck. – Is it supposed to be a first date compliment?

– The second date, – I try to joke.

– No, the first one. It was work in the morning.

– Okay, then I'll start telling you compliments, – I mumble, – You're clever, beautiful, talented…

– Add 'punctual' to it, – Vika ties her hair with a white band.

– No, I better say – generous. It's a heroism to sell such paintings.

– Nonsense, – Vika waves her hand lightly, – I sell the originals, these stay with me. They are better.

She didn't notice her mistake, and I'm really glad for it; I say quickly:

– Why?

– They sound.

Oh, that's what it is… The sound of wind and splashing of water coming from the paintings wasn't an illusion.

– The new art is being born, – I say.

– It was born long time ago and not only one new art. We just don't understand yet that this is an art. When the cave people were

drawing deer on the walls it wasn't instantly recognized as an art either.

– Well, in this case all Deeptown is a work of art.

– Sure. Not all of it but some places sure are. Come here.

Vika grabs my hand without ceremonies and drags me to the window.

– Look.

Now I see, Vika was painting from nature… but do such mountains really exist? The central peak – hardly. It is at least ten kilometers high, it breaks out of the mountains chain as a proud rebel. The clouds circle its crest, unable to cover it. The mountain looks like cut into layers – the dark green of the forests, the light green of alpine meadows, the snowy ring and the gray lifeless granite of the peak itself.

The lake is spread out between the mountain and our hut which stands on considerable height too. The lake is not too big but is perfectly round, I'd say – looking drawn if it wasn't so alive. The water is dark blue, heavy, on the point of freezing.

I stay silent.

– Don't you fear it's just an entourage for whimsical customers? – asks Vika.

– Yeah right… They'll manage without it.

We look at the mountains.

– Did it take you long to draw that? – I ask quietly.

– Two years, – says Vika carelessly.

I nod. One could spend even more time on this. These are not standard beauties outside the window being sold on every corner. It seems to me that even if I take a very strong binoculars I'll not have to imagine anything, the picture is done completely, full volume.

– I want to descend there, – says Vika looking at the lake.

I silently nod in agreement.

– It's scary though, the path is too hard, – Vika sighs, – If you tie the rope to the window it's easy to get out there. But the landslide happened on the North slope half a year ago and it's most likely that the path is blocked.

I turn and look into her eyes. No, she doesn't joke or laugh.

– You want to say that all this is alive? – I ask, – You can enter there, climb the mountain, swim in the lake?

– The water is freezing, you'll catch cold.

– And this all lives? The snow is falling, avalanches and storms happen?

Vika nods.

– A separate server is needed to support such space!

– Two servers. One is completely full, the other one also supports

the whole 'institution'.

I swallow the cold air and ask:

– So… why do you work here then? Any company would hire you as a spatial designer, just let them look into this window!

– I have my own reasons, – says Vika in a slightly raised tone and I understand that the question was inappropriate.

The freedom for everybody and in everything.

Who knows, maybe she likes to be a virtual prostitute?

– Thanks, – I say.

Vika frowns in puzzlement.

– Thanks for letting me to see it, – I explain, – You don't bring just anyone here, right?

– No. But will you show me your paintings? – she asks with a smile and I start. – You said you can't think out the names. It means, you had to do it before.

Uh-oh… My fault too and like Vika I haven't noticed that.

– I'm not drawing for a long time, – I confess, – It so happened… Maybe for good, I can't do anything like this anyway.

She doesn't even try to argue politely, she knows what she is worth.

– You know, I wanted to invite you to the restaurant, – I say, – If you want…

– No.

I feel myself spat all over. For some reason I was sure that Vika will accept, that she'll like "Three Piglets", that we'll stand above the mountain stream; even if it wasn't me who created the landscape I love it anyway…

– I understand, – I say.

– No, you don't. It's not because of the customers, it's a quiet hour now anyway and the girls can work for me. I want to invite you myself, to our restaurant.

I can't understand but accept. Vika examines me critically and straightens the collar of my shirt.

– Good enough, – she decides, – Let's go.

– Is it far?

Vika just smiles and grabs the small leather purse from the table. We enter the corridor and I notice that the doors don't squeak in curiosity anymore. We walk hand in hand, with decorum, like well-behaving kids on a walk. The corridor ends with winding stairs, I count 7 turns until the heavy velvet curtains block our way. For a second I think that the space is 'turned inside out' here and now we'll exit into the lobby on the first floor.

– Don't be surprised by anything, – says Vika and steps forward.

I follow her being absolutely sure that I'll be able to do it.

We exit to the sea shore.

The sunshine colors the sky in orange and gold. The sea breathes tiredly, caressing the shore. The sand under our feet is black, the entire beach is coal black. I know that such beaches exist, I never thought it's so beautiful.

White tables under umbrellas are standing on the shore, some people sitting by them. All are alive, not program fakes, I feel it instantly. Most of them are girls except two muscular guys by the table closest to the water and also a lean guy in blinders by the bar.

– This is our recreation area, – whispers Vika, – Let's go.

We sit by the empty table, Vika turns to me:

– It's self service here. Go to the bar, bring me some champaign.

I walk over sticking in the sand. Three men and twenty women watch me. Everything looks extremely strange, as if a terrible typhoon had swept along the shoreline blowing away hotels and houses but leaving only this part of an open restaurant. The impression is enhanced by the door through which we have entered – it stands in the sand lonesomely.

– Hi there, – says the guy by the bar quickly and shoves me his hand.

I shake it automatically.

– Vika prefers dry champaign, – says the guy, – But don't take the French one, take Abrau-Durso, it should be somewhere to the left under the bar… Are you here for the first time? I never saw you before. A quiet day today, all girls are here. Now they'll have a topic to discuss…

He chatters with the energy of Robinson who have met Friday for the first time. He has a very vivid face, a couple of teeth are missing.

– Gee, I like you, – says the guy, scratching his stomach, sunburned skin peeling off, – Hell, I really like you! Hee-hee… scary, huh? No, I'm not working here… well, I do but not like this… be careful not to be suddenly liked by those two by the water!

I start feeling dizzy already, I squeeze out a pathetic smile, take a bottle of brut from the ice filled bucket and a couple of high wine-glasses.

– Here, look… I was tanning too much yesterday! – says the guy in the meantime, tearing off a long piece of peeling skin. – I had a bet with the girls that I'll be sunburned, they didn't want to believe me. They come this morning – and I'm really burned!

He pushes the pitiful remains of his hide under my nose.

– Cool, huh? Worked like hell all night making tan simulation. I should try to offer it to somebody, they'll really grab it from me together with my hands… but I won't give my hands to them!

I nod hastily and run away with my trophies. Vika waits for me

choking the laughter.

– Who is that? – I ask lowering myself on the chair. The soft whisper of waves by the shore seems to be the greatest bless.

Vika continues to laugh, then becomes serious.

– This is our computer genius, the hacker and the guard, the master of hard and soft… You can call him Computer Wiz or just Wiz. He likes that. Just don't call him Zuko.

– Zuko?

– Yup. He loves those instant beverages: "Zuko", "Spreem", other chemical stuff. The girls call him that, it really hurts him.

– But why is he… so weird? – I ask carefully.

– I Dunn… Maybe he scares our gays off, maybe he's really like that.

I examine the guys by the water askance and they also watch me discussing something. Then one of them is slapped on the lips slightly by the other one and turns away in hurt feelings.

I start feeling uncomfortable but Vika continues to smile and I ask with forced curiosity:

– Why would you need the guys? Can't the girls always manage the job?

– Sure. Remember the blue album?

I remember. The devil tempts me and I ask:

– And where do you keep those she-goats?

We laugh together and the tenseness disappears.

– This is a program, – confesses Vika, – We tried to put on animals' bodies but the behavior turns out inadequate. The customers for that don't happen often but at least we have everything. Any weirdness.

I pour the champaign into the glasses, we touch them.

– Good, – says Vika.

– Yeah, not bad, – I agree putting down the empty glass.

– "Abrau-Durso" is never bad. It's just for you – "not bad". I just had a doubt how will you act in such a company.

– Hm, what's so special? – I ask in the tone of somebody who walks in the company of gays and prostitutes every day.

Vika thinks for a while.

– No, you don't think so yet, – she says, – But it's okay. The most important is that you at least express agreement. It means, you'll make yourself to believe in it later.

– May I? – Computer Wiz stands by the table, somehow weirdly bent over and with a pleading grimace, – aren't you discussing me? I hope don't interrupt? May I sit?

– Sure, – sighs Vika looking doomed. The Wiz plops down on the empty chair, gets the glass and one more bottle from behind his back

in a juggler's gesture: some kind of banana liquor.

– Vikochka dear, thanks! – he says, – I started to think I'm doomed to perish alone! Want some?

Vika fills her glass with champaign in an answer, I also decline the liquor. The Wiz pours it in his glass.

– For our acquaintance! – he proclaims, – I'm Computer Wiz!

– I'm Gunslinger, – I say mechanically.

– Oy! – The Wiz leans back on the chair, – Don't kill me! It's you who keeps "Labyrinth" so excited for the last two days, right? Vika, my congratulations, you've befriended the cool doomer! He makes everybody cry! He kills and kills, to the left and to the right!

– Is it true? – asks Vika.

I just nod.

– I'd never imagine.

– Well, I guess I should surprise you too.

– Hey Gunslinger, don't make too big mess in "Labyrinth"! – exclaims the Wiz, – Otherwise I'll take a leave from Madam, will move myself over there and will rip everything into shreds! I'm a peaceful guy usually but it's a nightmare when somebody pisses me off! Hold me three, two will fail… I remember once…

– Wiz, – says Vika, – We were talking, we have a serious talk. Could you please chat with Tina or Lena?

The Wiz nods sadly.

– It's always like this… Okay-okay, I'm leaving. Nobody likes me…

– I like you very much but Tina is depressed since yesterday. Cheer her up, I know you can do it.

– No problems! – Wiz brightens up. He picks up his bottle and in a dancing walk moves over to the table where the dark-haired splendid girl drinks vodka intently.

I just shake my head.

– This is our own small world here, – says Vika, – A pretty quiet and peaceful one. By the way, all girls come hear in their main bodies, not the ones we put on for the customers.

– So this is your main body in virtuality?

– Yes.

I make the next step.

– And the name too? Your name is Vika?

– In the Deep – yes. That's the only reason why I allowed you to come: you guessed it right.

She smiles sadly.

– In the beginning I even thought that you're some sort of a spy, a hacker or a diver, that you had identified my personality…

My heart starts beating hard.

– And what about now? Do you still think so?

Vika shrugs:

– Who knows? But I like you. I just want everything to coincide this way by itself… in a wonderful and beautiful way.

I don't have time to reply, the curtain on the door opens and the girl's face pokes in for a second:

– Natasha, Tina, your call. The green and the yellow albums.

The splendid girl by whom the Wiz have already made himself comfortable, throws the bottle at the door. Vika rises a little.

– Alice! – she says quietly but clearly, – Substitute Tina!

The girl by the nearby table nods but Tina raises her hands in protest,

– Vika, I'm alright.

She talks through the interpreter program but even through it one can hear feelings of tiredness and anger.

– I'll work as a kid, it's okay… That Cap pissed me off yesterday. { *a nick here* } One of the gays stands up and quickly moves between the tables, he hugs Tina's shoulders, whispers something to her and gently makes her sit, then looks at Vika questionably.

– All right Anjei, – she agrees, – Thanks.

The gay and one of the girls exit. Vika sits down and drinks her champaign in one shot, then suddenly says in a hissing whisper,

– Assholes. All you males are assholes.

– Who is Cap? – I ask.

– A customer. A constant one. I usually work with him myself but yesterday… I was busy.

– With me?

– Yes, – she replies sharply. – The girls shouldn't work with him, they are out of themselves afterwards.

– What does he need?

– The red album.

I recollect yesterday's evening.

– I haven't seen that one.

– It's an inclusion into the black album. It is not shown just to anybody. – Vika rises, – Damned… Sorry Lenia.

I rise too.

– Did you want to invite me somewhere?

– Yes…

– So go ahead!

Back in the lobby, I look around expecting to see Madam but she doesn't show up. I call the taxi and tell the address: "Three Piglets". Vika cools down slowly. I want to ask her about Cap and the red album but stay silent. I can't. Not yet.

– So, I showed you how we live, – says Vika, – Interesting, isn't it?

– It's okay, – I say, – Not too bad.

– Okay… – Vika takes cigarettes from her purse, clicks her lighter, – Not too bad…

I don't like when girls smoke, even if in virtuality.

– Vika, what did you expect of me? Screaming "How terrible!"? I'm not a hypocrite. Raptures? I can't see any reason for that either.

She touches my hand lightly.

– Sorry Lenia. I'm little worried for girls. You know, you're a random customer. You were fleeing from pursuit, ran into the brothel, went crazy on my picture… Sorry. You don't have anything to do with that.

We approach "Three Piglets". There's no 'rush hours' in virtuality: zone time canceled this term but some random fluxes and refluxes happen. For instance, now the hall is packed.

We elbow our way to the bar and I shout, "Hi Andrei!" to the bartender.

– Hi-hi… – says Andrei, giving a glass of cocktail to somebody, – And who are you?

Wow, it's really him, not a program.

– Leonid, – I reply.

Andrei knits his brow, he never saw me in this body and makes precautions.

– Hey man! – I say in a scary whisper, – What's wrong? Tortured by taxes again? The racket filched your file stuff? Just tell, we'll find…

Andrei leans over the bar and shouts:

– Ah! Haven't recognized you! Just look how you've grown! A real man!

Vika hesitates nearby patiently, obviously feeling out of place. Just like I did in the brothel's recreation zone.

– You want it as usual? – asks Andrei and outstretches his hand towards the bottles.

– Gin-Tonic, fifty-fifty, – I smirk, – It's me, it's me. We'd like to sit somewhere above the river. Alone.

Andrei frowns slightly and looks under the bar, at the terminal.

– Are all channels busy? – I'm horrified.

– We'll find one for you, – decides Andrei. He pushes some button, – A penny deal… Oh, what a perfect timing! Sudden disconnect, one channel's free! Go ahead, quick!

I grab Vika's hand and pull her to the stone wall of the restaurant. In the tambour I order:

– Individual space for us two. No access to anyone else.

– Acknowledged, – whispers the ceiling, – No access. You're guests of the restaurant. "Three Piglets" wishes you a nice rest.

– How cool, – says Vika ironically, – And you're their permanent

customer?

– Yes.

I don't tell her all the tiny details, like about that little diver's fraud when I found and kicked some racketeers' butts. They stole original financial files from restaurant's owner. If I failed to persuade that gang of undereducated hackers, Andrei would have to fork up quite an amount… either for racket or for Deeptown's tax inspection. But in this case… everything ended in peace, even racketeers were happy… to get out of this so easily.

We enter the autumn.

Vika stops for a second looking around, picks decayed leaf from the ground, crumbles it in her hands, touches the tree trunk.

I wait. Usually I waver the same way when I enter unfamiliar virtual spaces. I also usually leave the deep to evaluate the real look of the landscape. Vika can't do that but spatial designers must have their own methods.

– Beautiful, – she whispers, – Maybe Carl Siegsgourd himself worked. I'm envious.

– Yours is not worse. – I console her but Vika shakes her head.

– Not in everything, he has an excellent sense of measure, while I can be carried away easily.

She kicks fallen leaves in childish manner, they slowly fly up and fall down again. Their flights are over already.

– Let's go, – I take her hand and lead her to the river. The table is laid for a banquet. The specialty of the house – fried pork 'a-la Piglet' is on the table in a big plate, also my favorite mulled wine and decent set of other wines.

Vika doesn't look at the table, she stands by the steep looking in the distance. I stand by her side. The stream washes over leaves of a fallen tree on the opposite bank. Looks like it was a storm lately. This space is alive too, just as Vika's mountains.

– Thank you, – says Vika and I feel great. I think I yet should show her the sea shore and the part of old Moscow that are adjoined to the restaurant but all this – later. I'm sure that we'll yet have time for that.

Otherwise why is everything?

– You know, I leave my space very seldom, – says Vika, – I don't know why.

She hesitates, then goes on:

– Maybe I'm just afraid to meet those who comes to us… to see them as the ones they can be– kind, cheerful, nice people.

– Why?

– Then it'll be true that all people are bifacial. You know, we're a garbage can Leonid. The one in which all shit which was accumulated

in peoples' souls is dumped. Fear, aggression, unsatisfied desires, disdain to themselves. I think your "Labyrinth" is the same in this way.

– It's not 'mine'. I'm there for business.

– Then it's easier for you. But who comes to us? Milksops who can't wait to become men… who grew tired of being ones, some guys pissed off by their girlfriends with a wish to swagger… Some of them come and try all albums. They say: "We must try everything in this life."…

Again I restrain myself and don't ask why the hell does she work there then.

– Why do we drag the worst that we have in the future with us? – says Vika

– Because it does exist and we can't do anything about it. Just imagine that everyone around us are gentlemen in tuxedos, ladies in evening dresses, everybody speak in clever beautiful words, are nice and civilized…

Vika laughs softly,

– I don't believe in this.

– Neither do I. No society change, be it technical, social or a complex one like the Deep, ever changed individual moral principles. Everything was postulated: from disdain towards the bond-slaves to brotherhood and equality, from ascetism to complete license. But the choice was always made individually. It's stupid to say that virtuality have made people worse than they were and it's naive to hope that it'll make them better. We were given an instrument and it depends on us whether we'll build using it or crush skulls.

– Wrong instrument, Lenia. Everybody understand that they are really at home or at work, sitting by a computer in a helmet or just gazing at the screen and therefore everything is allowed. It's a game, a mirage.

– You're speaking like Alexandrians.

– No, I don't like their approach either. I have no wish to turn into the stream of electronic impulses.

– Vika… – I put my hand on her shoulder, – It's not worthy to guess or worry. The Deep is only 5 years old. It's yet a child. It grabs everything it can reach, speaks nonsense, laughs and cries irrelevantly. We have no idea what it'll grow into, we don't know whether it'll have brothers and sisters that will be better. We just must give it some time.

– We need to give it a goal, Lenia. We have dived into this world without defining for ourselves what have we left behind. Being unable to live in one world we have created another one and we don't know where to go, what to aspire to.

– The goal will appear, – I say without great confidence, – Again, just allow it some time… let the Deep to become aware of itself.

– But what if it did already? – says Vika mockingly, – …and became alive? Like in imagination of those people who never been here? Maybe there are people here among us that don't exist in real world? Reflections of void? What if you or me don't really exist at all? And what if all our ideas of reality are just fantasies of the Net that became alive?

Suddenly I feel scared.

No, I don't think that I don't really exist.

And I'm almost sure about Vika.

But I think I know the candidate for being the 'reflection of void'…

Vika goes on as if wishing to drive me crazy:

– Just imagine how it can happen. Hundreds of thousands or maybe millions of computers are already plugged into the Net permanently. Flows of information rush between the continents, accumulate on different hosts/routers, in machine memory. Nonexistent spaces live according to their own laws, change. Leaves are falling, our steps leave traces, our voices start avalanches. Information copies over, becomes tangled, mixes. Docile programs create plaster casts, shells but who knows how soon those shells will be filled with real intelligence?

– Any hacker will die of laughter listening to you, – I say in a 'wooden' voice.

– I'm not hacker. I just see what is going on around and I try to imagine what would somebody who came from nowhere think if he appears in Deeptown being sure that he is alive and real? Grimacing buffoons? People running around in "Labyrinth" and cheerfully killing each other? Psychos having fun in brothels? Everything that exists in reality we have here too. The sky and the Sun, mountains and seas, cities and palaces. Spaces within spaces, the mixture of times and nations, merits and vices. Everything! Everything and nothing. We need only what we hate in real life. Death, blood, fake beauty and borrowed wisdom. So what might the Deep think of people if it learns how to think?

I stay silent, remembering Unfortunate who kills monsters with a pistol but never shoots at players. Who doesn't tell his name and address. Who have spent two days in the virtuality already but his tongue doesn't falter of thirst and his feet don't stagger. Who doesn't understand that the kid that flees from mutants is nothing more than a hundred kilobytes of a program on the 33rd level's server.

I remember the words of Man Without Face: "Something have changed now." This was the direct hint, together with memoirs about 'Invisible Boss' and 'Lost Point'. Something had happened that doesn't have any analogies except in the folklore.

I start to shiver.

Accidents can't happen fifteen times in a row – "Labyrinth"'s divers would rescue Unfortunate… if the Net itself wouldn't resist that. There's nowhere to get Unfortunate out, he lives in this world only. He's chained to "Labyrinth"'s world, the world of shooting and betrayal, blood and ruins. He dies and resurrects not understanding what happens to him.

– Vika… – I whisper, – Vika, God forbid…

– What? – she looks at me and makes one step from me, – What's wrong with you?

– God forbid you're right… And I do think you're right.

She grabs my hand, squeezes it strongly, almost painfully and shouts:

– For how long have you set your timer? Where do you live? Lenia, wake up! You're alive, you're real! I'm talking nonsense!

It feels funny: Vika was scared for me.

– I'm fine, – I say, – I'm alive and real. I'm not having Deep-psychosis. But I know the guy who can't be alive.

As strange as it seems, Vika calms down. If I were her, I would feel even more scared.

– I had met those too… – she declares.

I shake my head.

– Vika, I know a man who behaves just as in your fantasy. He doesn't tell reality and virtuality, he lives in the Deep, not plays.

She gets it instantly, – In "Labyrinth"?

– Yes.

– This is called lost sense of reality… it's neural related, but nothing more.

– I saw what is it when the nervous system fails… This… is different.

– Lenia, – Vika smiles, – I've told lots of nonsense and scared you… You know, similarities are confusing.

I want to tell her about Man Without Face and Unfortunate. About accidents that became systematic. But I signed the contract and promised to keep it confidential.

And also – I'll have to confess that I'm diver.

I have enough experience of such confessions.

I can imagine what do the girls think kissing the diver, "Now he'll leave the Deep and my face will turn into the mask of tiny pixels. He's free here and I'm a prisoner."

I don't want Vika to think so, don't want it to be a wall between us.

– You're right, – I whisper and Vika snugs close to me.

We stand above the steep, kissing each other, the river roars

below and the wind tousles our hair. A lonesome bird's cry, a momentary flash of the sunlight is the clouds, the leaf carpet beneath our feet. It's soft and smells spicy. I take off Vika's dress and she helps me to undress too. I kiss her body, my lips touch the live warmth, it's not me in the Deep but the Deep inside me, it's our world around, I'll never leave it, we'll get lost in these forests and will find a way to the mountains seen from her window.

Vika whispers something but I can't hear words, we are too deep, we left the boundaries of all spaces.

Then there comes a short moment when spaces merge.

We are together despite all distances and uncertainties.

– Don't leave me Gunslinger, – whispers Vika, – Just dare to leave me.

– I'll never leave you, – I say. We snuggle together, the wind slides against the skin, damp leaves cool my back, I look up but clouds whirl circling above, one moment – and I'll fall into the sky, will lose myself in realities following Unfortunate.

– Who are you Lenia?

But I can't answer, I hug Vika again and our lips touch making all words empty and unnecessary.

My time is up, – whispers Vika, – I'll have to leave… soon.

I understand, hug her even tighter as if I can stop the timer on the opposite end of invisible thread, to hold her in the Deep for a minute, for a second longer…

– Come to me again, – Vika raises her head and rises on her elbows above me, – Come today, I'll wait for you.

I nod, reach out for her but it's too late.

Her body turns pale and dims, dissolves in the cloud of violet sparks, the dress melts on the ground like a handful of snow. One moment and I stay alone under the sky that wants me to fall into it, to be lost in cloudy fog, to become one more human who doesn't understand the border between the worlds.

And Vika will be with me always, we'll become equal and I'll never have to answer the question with a kiss…

I shake my head and force myself face forward into withered leaves.

It happens, all divers know the moment when they want so much to become just like the others.

I need to flee.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours… Let me go…

Tiny screens before my eyes, cool wind from the conditioner.

– Ate me? – I asked the Deep, – Tasty, huh? Aren't your teeth aching?

The deep was silent. It had nothing to answer, it have lost again.

As if the world have broken into two halves, the one where it was love and the one where I was rolling on the floor hugging the void. Damn this split personality after which one feels himself an idiot!

I took off the helmet. The body was feeling like stuffed with cotton wool. I need a good sleep. I outstretched my hand and tore the virtual suit's cable from the port.

– Device fault! – said Windows-Home scared, – Lenia, check the plug of the virtual suit!

– Pause, – I said standing up and stretching. The suit needs washing.

I entered the bathroom, undressed and padded under the shower, stood there for a minute feeling tight jets of water on my face. Then picked the suit up from the floor, took a piece of laundry soap and began washing it.

Yup, this is how they usually ruin costly things – being too lazy… or too shy to bring it to the cleaners.

After washing the suit with extreme care, I hung it on the hangers and that on the hook above the bathtub. The water started flowing down. Squeezing the fabric that has hundreds of tiny wires, sensors and pressure imitators inside is even more insane than washing. Well, let's rely on Philips' reputation, maybe they even took the Russian carelessness into consideration.

My old virtual suit, Chinese made but still quite decent one, was lied about in the closet. I was going to sell it all the time but never found a time to post an ad in the Net. Now I was happy I haven't.

After pulling on cheerfully colored knitted fabric I walked along the room for some time. Feels quite okay, it became a little tight but not too much. I even started whistling something waving the suit cable in the air.

Vika's words are nonsense. She really was imagining things and I've lost my sense of critic. The Net is nothing more than just hundreds of thousands of computers plugged into phone lines. Virtuality is just a trick of subconsciousness.

Electronic intelligence is impossible on the basis of Pentiums and 'forths'. Any computer specialist will explain that to you if he won't feel too lazy to argue with an obvious stupidity.

I plugged the suit into the port and Windows-Home declared cheerfully:

– New device was detected! Do you want to install it?

– Yes.

My main suit will be drying for at least three days. Let Windows-Home better install the old suit properly.

– Movement sensors… test passed… pressure imitators… test passed… power consumption… test passed… critical overloads'

limitation… test failed! Warning, the given virtual suit model doesn't conform to acceptable safety standards! Discomfort is possible during virtual contacts! It's not recommended to…

– Proceed with testing. – I ordered. All Chinese made suits suffer this drawback – unacceptable one from the point of view of Western Europeans or Americans. If the concrete slab squashes me in virtuality, the suit might react too eagerly and leave a pair of bruises on my body.

To be honest, I don't care much.

– Testing complete. I recommend to cancel device installation.

– Complete installation. – I said putting the helmet on.

– Are you serious? – asked Windows-Home.

– Yes.

– Device installed, – agreed the program with grief.

deep Enter The wind blows stronger, I shiver stepping back from the steep. My head is wet and it's not too comfortable to stand here.

Especially being alone.

I pick up the thermos and pour myself some mulled wine, take a couple of sips just to warm up a little. We yet will come here again, together with Vika. I really hope she liked it here, there's not too many places in virtuality that I like unconditionally.

– See you, – I say to the river, to the wind and to the autumn forest, then pad to the exit.

If I walk to "Labyrinth" I'll just kill the rest of the time and the divers will finish their attempts to save Unfortunate.

For some reason I'm sure they'll fail.

1011

The first thing I see entering the 33rd level is Anatol sprawled on the grass. My first thought is that even a professional can fail but Anatol raises his head and waves to me.

Unfortunate is also here – in his corner.

– Hey Gunslinger! – it is obvious that Anatol is not going to change his horizontal position into vertical one, – Crawl over here!

I sit down nearby and nod questionably.

– We're gonna refuse from that… – Anatol nods towards Unfortunate, – …assignment.

I stay silent, letting him to relieve himself.

– I don't believe in karma, – says Anatol, – If one brings the guy to the exit with such a care as if he's a crystal vase but he still dies, it means he wants it himself.

– Oh?

Anatol lowers his voice to whispering:

– Look, you have your own reasons to save him… go ahead and try. But think first – he's in the Deep for two days. Have you seen such heroes before?

– Yes.

– Hoarse voice, walks like a robot, understands everything from the third attempt… Right?

I look at Unfortunate and shake my head.

– So, it means that he eats and drinks, he visits bathroom and orients himself in what's going on.

Anatol rises a little and squats.

– Gunslinger, this guy thinks we're idiots. Either he's here on an assignment from the management checking how we're doing our job or he's another diver, just as we are. Or both at the same time.

I have nothing to say. Of course Anatol is right. There's no other options from the normal logic's point of view. But I just have some problems with 'normality' as of late.

– Crazy came to see the management, – says Anatol, – Either they confess that they are checking our abilities or they stop demanding impossible from us.

– They'll conclude that Unfortunate is a diver.

– See?

– This is a very comfortable version Anatol. Some diver trickster making fun of entertainment industry and his colleagues… Of course, nobody would shut down "Labyrinth" because of such a trinket.

– Gunslinger, I dragged him through the whole damned level, – says Anatol tiredly, – I've shoot all guards in the mirror hall…

I nod, it's sure possible with his gear and experience.

– You know what happened next? – an anger appears in diver's voice, – He dropped his carbine. And it shoot him right between the eyes!

I stay silent. What can I say? Unfortunate doesn't want to leave the level…

– I'm completely exhausted… – Anatol spits on the grass, – I can't even look at this asshole anymore, not to mention to save him…

– Anatol, nothing is done without reason.

– Then what does he tries to achieve? Huh? Well, I'll tell you. He wants us to cancel our contracts! To get the warm place himself! Alone or… in a pair with somebody. With the diver who will kinda save him!

He looks into my eyes and I take the challenge.

– You accuse me of double play?

Divers never frame divers. It's too little of us. That was the main purpose of the Code, that's why we meet three times a year neglecting our usual caution and mutual distrust.

If the divers start fighting each other in Deeptown the whole Net will suffer while the Net's well-being is the most important thing, it has enough enemies in the real world beside that.

– I don't know, – Anatol lowers his gaze, – Maybe not. I'm sorry. But you're being framed too. Who ordered you to save Unfortunate?

– The anonymous. I have a channel to communicate with him, but I fear it's for a single use only and too well secured one.

– Can this anonymous guy be diver?

I shrug.

– So make your conclusions. We have already failed, you've stirred up the whole "Labyrinth" but you'll flop too. Then some Unkie will arrive from nowhere, will save Unfortunate and get the contract.

Anatol stands up, unties the armor on his chest and offers in a business-like tone:

– Fire.

– What?

– Kill me. Then you'll be able to get all my gear. Or you're gonna fight the war with the carbine?

I hesitate and Anatol shakes his head:

– Gee Gunslinger, you're just like Unfortunate himself…

He presses the plasma gun to his chest and pulls the trigger. A short blow, blood splashes out but he's still alive. Huge is the strength of "Labyrinth"'s divers.

– Fuck this! – croaks Anatol and shoots again.

The armor is bloodied all over but I try to ignore that. I take it off of him and pull on myself, then I pick up weapons and ammo.

Either Unfortunate doesn't look at us or he just doesn't react to such an unusual gear exchange procedure.

I pad closer and sit down beside him. Everything is like in the first time: lowered head, dull eyes behind the mask. Is he really the diver, now sitting by the computer with a sandwich and a cup of coffee? Glancing at the screen from time to time, ready to jump into the Deep at any moment – and to start to take me in…

– Aren't you bored here? – I ask. One second pause… Interesting, what did he use it for: to think of the answer or to start the deep-program? Then Unfortunate says hoarsely:

– I don't have a choice.

– Why not? Let's exit "Labyrinth". Have you ever been in "Three Piglets"? Or in "The Old Hacker"?

Unfortunate shakes his head.

– It's much more interesting there, – I say. We sit side by side, I hold BFG-9000 on my laps, ready to burn any enemy at any second. We'll definitely pass with such a gear. We can't fail. But I'm not in hurry for now, – Thank you by the way.

– For what?

– You covered me in that mirror hall.

Unfortunate takes off his respirator. I suddenly notice how strange his gestures are. Some rare softness and fluidness – as if every movement is a pleasure for him. Narcissistic actors act this way sometimes but unlike them Unfortunate doesn't irritate me.

– Does it require any thanks? – he asks with irony.

– Yes, – I reply, – Of course.

– Wouldn't you do the same?

– No, if I were you.

Pause. Looks like Unfortunate is surprised.

– Why?

– You're in trouble. It's you whom I must get out of "Labyrinth".

– It's not me who is in trouble, – Unfortunate shakes his head.

– Are you a diver? – I ask directly.

– No.

– Listen man, stop taking me in. You're in the deep for more than two days. You must be dying of thirst and hunger by now.

– Thirst is not the most terrible thing.

– So, what is more terrible?

– The silence.

– What?

– The silence, Gunslinger.

He looks into my eyes and I don't pull away my gaze, our faces are very close.

His eyes become alive, there's no more dull helplessness in them.

The black deepness… the endless darkness as if I look into the sky where all stars came out simultaneously, into the maelstrom of darkness, the silent one that drags into itself, beyond the border of worlds.

– The Silence, – he whispers.

I can feel it, this Great Silence which he tries to tell me about and it's good he doesn't say a word now. Any words are helpless, they only scratch the layer of the Silence too weak to break through it and only hinder to comprehend it.

The Silence.

Whoever you are Unfortunate, you know more about it than anybody else in this world.

One more second – and I'll fall into the Silence, will understand Unfortunate.

I don't want to understand him!

– That's what I fear of… – he says and the delusion disappears. I just sit beside him, two drawn guys exchanging vague phrases.

Is it possible to get crazy in the Deep I wonder? Maybe I'll be the first?

– Why did you kill yourself? – I ask.

– When?

– Anatol pulled you through, you dropped your carbine and shoot yourself into forehead. Do you want to tell me that it was an accident?

– Accidents don't exist.

– Then why?

– Anatol won't be able to get me out.

– Why?! – I shout. The talk of two deaf people, answers that don't explain anything.

Unfortunate doesn't reply.

Ah well, so be it.

Enough riddles for me, I'll just get him out of here. He won't have any choice – not any except to leave the level.

– Get up! – I shout, grab Unfortunate by the shoulders forcing him to stand up, pull his pistol out of the holster, discharge it and throw away.

– Go! March!

He doesn't argue – geez, if he would even try to… I'll drag him out on my own shoulders if necessary.

He won't have any choice.

We pass the Disneyland, I shoot the monsters not sparing the ammo, I have more than enough for this level.

The rocket launcher gets red-hot of constant shooting, I burn my shoulder even through the armor. Nevermind.

We see the kid that flees from three quick demons on the car ride

again. This time he's not black though but Latin-American. Gee, those American racial complexes… Unfortunate stops dead and we have to repeat the short duel with demons and the machine-gun spider. Then we move to the building the kid pointed at. This time Unfortunate holds him really tight and he can't break free. I enter the door instead of him. The hall is filled with half transparent shaking wineskin with teeth almost completely. Rockets pass through it without blowing up. I burn the beast using plasma gun, wasting two energy cells.

A couple is twitching in the next room, tied with a sticky cobweb: a man and a woman. They are guarded by a petty monster who even doesn't try to attack me but rushes to kill the prisoners instead. I shoot it with the carbine and free the kid's parents with Unfortunate's help. Further everything happens along the standard scenario: the tale of dreadful alien invasion, advises on passing the mirror labyrinth and the solemn gift: the plasma gun. Programs are primitive, they even don't notice that I already have this weapon. I yawn taking the gift. The rejoined family walks away. Everything is disgustingly vivid – the kid walks between his Mom and Dad, clinging to their hands… One should assume that they'll successfully get out of the Twilight City. I glance at Unfortunate – he's quite serious, as if he have really saved three lives.

We proceed towards the mirror labyrinth, I still don't give any weapon to Unfortunate. The least I need now is the trick with falling and shooting winchesters.

– Okay, – I command, – You will stop by the hall entrance. You will wait for me to call for you. Then we quietly come to the computers, and you get your ass home, outta here. Okay?

– Yes.

– Do you understand me? You won't do anything stupid, will you?

Unfortunate looks me in the eyes.

– Stupid – is to cover you?

– Yes! I'll sort everything out by myself and you will get out of here, understood?

– Understood.

Oh, I don't believe in his sincerity… but I have no other choice. We pass mirror corridors, I tap Unfortunate on the shoulder by the hall entrance. He stops obediently.

– Wait here. Wait for me and I'll be back, – I say. I make a step towards the entrance but can't help it and turn back to him.

– Look… whoever you are… I'm so tired.

Unfortunate nods.

– I'm sick of this insanity, – I go on, – Promise me that you won't jump out into the shooting. Promise me that you won't go anywhere. I want to get you out and to return home.

– I'll do everything as you say, – pronounces Unfortunate and I suddenly believe him.

– Thanks, – I whisper before storming into the hall.

And the fiery carousel starts.

The Alien Prince's Guards fire at me from thirteen balconies, I shoot back – point– blank. BFG-9000 burns three mirrors at once, the hall is filled with silvery smoke. Bullets drum against my armor knocking me down to the floor. I shoot while falling down, rotate quickly on my back as if in the forgotten dance of my youth – "break", then shoot three more times. Three mirrors, three mirrors, three mirrors…

The last reflecting edge, and now I see the real balcony with two monsters on it, washed over with green blood. My BFG have seriously damaged their scaly bodies while my armor is still fine, even if crumpled and red-hot, but still reliable.

The last shot – the fiery blast, the scratching sound of secondary discharges… Monsters scream dying, turning into whirls of black ash.

And the silence falls.

The mirror hall is burned to the ground and ruined, just the computer screen triumphantly glows in the midst of the mess.

– And the silence came… – I whisper rising on my knees. Thanks for the armor Anatol, many thanks… – Hey Unfortunate!

The quiet sound from the corridor – a hesitating step… and two short popping sounds – carbine shots.

I don't need any explanations.

And I don't need any comfort.

I drag myself towards the entrance, step over Unfortunate's bloody corpse and look into the reflective infinity of the corridor.

Alex is standing surrounded by his ghostly twins lowering his carbine. He has remains of the armor on him, the face covered in blood, the carbine's barrel points down at its reflection on the floor.

– I'm out of ammo, – he says.

I throw away BFG, pull the gun from behind my belt and push the barrel into Alex' forehead with such force that he shrinks back.

I even don't have anger anymore.

Alex waits for the shot silently.

– Sit down, – I say lowering my weapon, – Sit down, you bastard.

He sits down, I sit by him on the floor and the body of Unfortunate who was so unlucky again blindly stares at the ceiling.

– Why did you kill him?

– I… wanted to kill you, – says Alex, – I was after you. I feared to be late, I haven't noticed that he was unarmed.

– Okay, then why me?

Alex smirks.

– You shoot me down on the first level, have you forgot?

– No. And this is the only reason?

– But we had a deal to go together, hadn't we?

Oh Lord, why do you punish me?

– Do you want to say that you weren't going to shoot me yourself for the spare cartridge?

– I was considering that, – confesses Alex calmly, – But I had not decided yet. And you killed me.

At this point the laughter gets me, I fall on the floor, nudge my helmet into Unfortunate's leg, hit the floor with my hand.

– You freak! – I shout, – Dumbass!

Alex feels hurt for some reason.

– I had not shoot you! – he shouts, – But you had!

– Man, are you screwed! – I say, – Fucking avenger… unfinished Zorro… I'm diver! Do you understand? The guy whom you shoot down is for two days in the Deep already! His timer is off! He will croak if I don't get him out! And you, with your complexes… idiot, idiot…

– Diver? – Alex repeats dumbly.

– Diver! – I don't care about our eternal conspiration now, – I'd spit on this "Labyrinth" from the 40th floor! I'm trying to save the human – and you're playing war games, sucker! How old are you, kid?

Alex doesn't reply at once, but does anyway.

– Forty-two.

I get the next laughter attack.

Here it is, Piter Pan's kingdom, the island of eternal kids.

The war games' lover, entering his fifth decade.

There's no age in virtuality. Both a solid aged businessman and an immature youth who managed to get to the computer with modem at work – are equal.

Everyone has a right to run along drawn labyrinths remembering kids' rules of honor and shouting, "Not fair!".

Everyone can play noble heroes and brave knights forgetting that the life is much more complicated than ten Old Testament commandments.

– I'm really sorry, – says Alex, – I didn't know that you're doing such an important job…

Oh Lord, how funny… No, nothing serious, I've just dropped in here to pee.

– If I can help somehow… – says Alex in muffled voice, – …to pay for the time you've spent…

– You can't buy the time. – I reply. It would be really better if Alex was keeping to act like a young programmer… – The guy in whom you've stuck your fucking bullets is now dying somewhere of

hunger and thirst!

– I'm really sorry, – Alex rises and pads to me. I look up at him, not even trying to stand up. – It's just that you were acting in non-ethical way. You had shot me without any obvious reason.

It's useless to talk to him…

– Maybe I was wrong, – his voice gains some strength, – But you should understand that your initial conduct was the reason for all that followed. Obviously, you're younger than me…

I look at the ceiling, at the dead bony Unfortunate's face.

– Though, you should understand like I do that we are in the unreal world, the one that doesn't exist, – pontificates Alex, – This is a dangerous illusion… people can easily lose their life's guiding points, their moral norms, they can submit to the feeling of complete license. Maybe my actions were not completely right but I always try to keep usual human categories. "Labyrinth" is a game but it embodies eternal ideals. Ideals of chivalry if you want, the fight of the good against the evil.

Yet another illusion fighter. Geez, how many of those do I remember – the people who tried to make the Deep the exact copy of the real world. The funniest thing that the most noisy one among them was sci-fi writer…

– You were acting not honestly from the very beginning, – says Alex, – and here… is the sad conclusion. You know diver, it was always like this. From the very world's creation. All the history is the living example!

– … And in the boiling cauldrons of past slaughters and troubles… – I whisper, – … there's so much food for those petty brains of ours…

Alex shuts up.

– Have you squared your accounts with me? – I ask, – Go ahead, tell me, have you? Or you also want to shoot me by yourself? Come on, do it!

I throw a pistol to him and outstretch my hands apart.

– I… didn't mean that… – mumbles Alex, – If you would just admit your being wrong, it would be quite enough…

– I admit it, – I say, pressing the rocket launcher's tube opening against my chest, – I admit it. I should had waited for you to shoot me. Now you're satisfied?

Alex retreats one step, waves his hands in protest. Obviously he's not satisfied with such an outcome, he haven't yet justified himself.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours…

The trigger is so hard, I barely managed to pull it.

Blood on the helmet's screens.

And complete silence inside me.

No, I haven't pulled the unfortunate player from the Deep, and haven't tried to outwit my unprincipled colleague. It's just how it IS.

The virtuality itself have risen against me.

Part 3. Man Without Face

0

I was present at the birth of virtuality, I was one of the first to try Dibenko's program and I don't have any common person's mystic fear of the computer at all.

Calculating machines can't be intelligent.

Vika might dream about self-born electronic mind – I can't believe in that. Everything that's going on in the deep is nothing more than just mutual interference of various programs. If anything goes beyond the frame of the possible, it means that some person is standing behind that.

But who, who can be behind eternal deaths of Unfortunate?

A good diver or just any experienced Deep inhabitant are sure capable of faking their death again and again. All those dropped carbines is a bull but why the Net itself plays up to Unfortunate? Why have Alex managed to catch up with us exactly at the moment when Unfortunate was left unattended? Is it just a coincidence?

Even more, two professionals driving Unfortunate to the exit couldn't guard him against coincidences either?

I can't believe in that.

I'm sitting in the "Labyrinth"'s cloak room after reentering the Deep, humiliated and defeated, a loser diver who thought he's more intelligent than the others. Abyss-abyss… how easily did you squash me. The fight is lost if the enemy haven't shown up.

Not without reason had Man Without Face promised me such a reward for the Unfortunate's rescue. He knew much more than he said. Keen shooting and good reaction won't help here.

That means, I have to stop banging on the drawn door either. It's time to look for the real way out.

I throw the armor and the rest of the gear into the closet, enter the shower and squirm under ice cold jets for a minute. Then the anger comes to replace helplessness and confusion. Great. Hello, anger. You are what I really need. Enough of games according to the rules.

I dress and enter the column hall.

– "Labyrinth"'s administration requests Gunslinger to visit Security Service manager, – rings out in the air immediately, – "Labyrinth"'s….

I'm being watched upon when I come to the door which Giullermo passed last time we met. I push it – unlocked.

This time the administration building is busy. I was let into the common space of "Labyrinth"'s sysops – I can see them and vice versa. Hardly I'll interest anybody here though. I pass the corridors looking at the glass doors – the terminals are behind them, guys and girls

sitting by. Big halls are behind some doors, with scale models on top of huge tables, "Labyrinth"'s levels' scale models – hills and ravines, buildings and ruins, rivers and blazing fires. People walk around them lazily. There, one guy leans above the model and pours some nasty greenish slush into a small stream. The stream starts bubbling. The guy nudges his coworker nearby who glances at defiled landscape and shrugs.

So this is how levels are constructed. Or rather their skeleton which then will live its own electronic life, inhabited by monsters and players. It will excite imagination of "Labyrinth"'s habitues for several months then it'll be changed.

– Are you Gunslinger?

The girl approaches me quietly and unnoticed, she's blonde and cute.

– Yes.

– Let's go, Mr. Aguirre is waiting for you.

I follow her. In general I know what they'll tell me now but why not to spend several minutes on formalities?

Guillermo stands by the window into "Labyrinth", the dark silhouette against the blood-red blaze. Everything is well thought through in the triangular shaped room – the office's owner seems small and lost against the window but draws attention at the same time. The visitor is on the crest of the pyramid and feels himself important involuntarily… and uncomfortable.

– Oh, Gunslinger! – Guillermo moves to meet me in energetic pace, – Sit down, sit down…

– You cancel the contract? – I ask directly.

Guillermo stops and rubs his nose bridge.

– Mmmm… yeah… Have you talked to Anatol, Gunslinger?

– I have.

As if he didn't controlled our talk…

– Gunslinger, you agree with our divers' opinion, no?

– No.

– Why?

– Will it change anything anyway? – I ask in return. – You have already decided to give up with the rescue.

– I didn't decide. – says Guillermo, slightly accenting on "I".

– But you cancel the contract anyway?

Guillermo sighs.

– We appreciate your attempts to help… very appreciate.

His speech becomes noticeably incorrect and I understand: Guillermo doesn't use interpreter program, he knows Russian, and knows it damn well. It's pleasant to know but I'm not surprised: Russians make a considerable part of the players, maybe because our

famous native lack of system is still alive… and many companies pay for their employees' fun instead of for their work in the Deep.

– … But there is an opinion that now we encounter the action of hostile diver. Proceeding with rescue means supporting his plans. Right?

I nod. There's no confidence in Guillermo's voice but I have nothing to oppose to "Labyrinth"'s divers' words either.

Yet.

It's useless to argue.

– The company will pay you a bonus, – says Guillermo, – We even can argue about the amount… a little.

He smiles friendly and a bit slyly.

– The amount is up to you., – I say.

Guillermo looks at me intently then sits by his table and draws the check. The gold plated Parker in his hand, the checkbook was issued by Chase Manhattan. The amount doesn't strike me as much as it could happen before Al-Kabar operation but it commands respect nevertheless.

– Thank you, – says Guillermo solemnly, handing the check over to me. It's nothing more than just a formality, the money have already been transferred to my secret account given in the contract but anyway it's pleasant to hold the nonexistent check in my hand.

I nod and shake Guillermo's hand. That's it, I can get out. The little boy was given a candy and kicked out of the adults' company which plays serious games.

– For the good parting? – Mr Aguirre gets the bottle from under the table, the real French Armagnac. It doesn't cost much more than Coke in virtuality but the gesture itself is pleasant, as if Aguirre has no doubt that the taste of this drink is familiar to me.

We touch glasses and I make a small sip. I'm not a big lover of cognacs and brandy but it's flattering to be considered a connoisseur of noble drinks for a minute anyway.

– I can guess how you will spend this money, – says Guillermo suddenly.

– Well, how?

– They'll return to the "Labyrinth"'s account, – Guillermo smirks.

– Nope.

He raises his eyebrows in surprise.

– You will give up? Yes?

– I'll rescue Unfortunate but I have enough money for this. As for this check… I'll return it. In order for you to change the amount.

Guillermo nods, he was expecting my insistence and is quite satisfied with the promise.

– Good luck, diver.

– If something unexpected happens in "Labyrinth"… could you please notify me? – I inquire, – Unofficially?

– Your address, – says Guillermo in business-like manner.

I give him my business card with the Net address, it's not my real 'coordinates', just a mailbox where I can get the letter for Gunslinger after supplying the password.

– Do you want me to call the taxi? – asks Mr Aguirre at parting.

– Thanks Willy, it's not necessary.

I stop the Deep-Transit's cab a couple of blocks away. Not that I was afraid of shadowing but it's better not to change good habits.

– Al-Kabar block, – I order. This time the driver is a nice red haired woman with tiny wrinkles around her eyes, excellently made face.

– This address doesn't exist, – she disappoints me.

– Al-Kabar. 8-7-7-3-8.

– Acknowledged.

The car starts, streets flash by. I ask Vika to change the masculine look of Gunslinger to the ingenuous mug of Ivan The Prince. One second – and the white-clad hero is reflecting in the rear-view mirror.

Pictures, just pictures and nothing more. Now Deep-Transit's programs toss my comm channel from server to server, preparing to connect me to Al-Kabar – to bring me to the horsehair bridge with the genie guard. Nothing more than pictures. The Deep can't have its own intellect!

But despite anything, I don't feel myself so confident in my own thoughts.

1

The desert meets me with its hot breath and the genie – with deafening roar:

– You dared to come back, the thief of thieves?

Good program… with memory.

The genie tears his legs from the sand, makes one step, then another. The hair bridge stretches and rings slightly but does not tear yet. Something new – Al-Kabar's programmers have added mobility to the guard program!

– Stop! – I shout raising my hand, – I came to Friedrich Urman! I'm not in your mercy!

The giant fist quivers above my head, sparks scratching between the fingers.

– Unfamiliar virus detected! – whispers Windows-Home in alarm, – Attention! I turn the "Web" on!

The space covers with slight mist, the antivirus program "Web" starts to cut off a part of incoming information trying to guard the computer from the virus. Not an ideal defense, a good virus will slip into my computer anyway but I don't stop Vika – she's in panic… if this word is appropriate here. The genie's shape flows and becomes blurry.

– Who are you? – roars the monster, its voice is distorted too.

– Diver! – I shout having nothing to hide this time.

– Wait! – orders the genie. Sparks on his palms go off and Vika stops the "Web".

Nothing else to do and I wait. The monster is motionless, just its eyes sparkle examining me with a strong, almost physically felt gaze. It was just a joke last time – I was let into the mousetrap because they were sure I won't be able to escape. Now, having their butts kicked, corporate programmers are able to cast all creations of their fantasy on my head and I'm sure that among them is a lot of those that might terrify not only me, not only Maniac but even the old guy Lozinsky himself. It's a perfect time to remember tales about viruses that destroy the hardware…

– Go ahead! – the monster becomes alive again.

I step onto the hair bridge.

Abyss-abyss…

Now not two cartoony guards meet me but the whole crowd with weapons.

If I were escorted like this last time I'd never be able to steal a megabyte file.

The guards drive me along the streets in the icy silence, I expect

that I'll be taken to the same veranda as it was before but our procession moves past it, right to the gloomy gray building.

They are what, going to imprison me? It's ridiculous, divers are invincible. It's possible to prevent us from stealing files but not to lock us in the virtual world.

Some guards stay outside, four others take me into the confinement. Two in front of me, two others behind my back, swords unsheathed. Oh, they definitely will set a virus in my machine, in full volume. Those who happened to survive winchester's crash would understand me. Once, in a tiny and almost unprofitable operation I managed to catch a very cute virus upon my stupid head. It mixed the FAT and partition table of my hard drive in a uniform cocktail. Maniac spent the whole day trying to recover the remains of data from the dead winchester and saved almost everything while I was bubbling some nonsense about pirated game CD which I had caught the virus from.

If even those dumb guys managed to infect my computer with such nasty thing, I'd better not even try to imagine what those guys from Al-Kabar are capable of.

The door slams heavily behind my back, closing. The confinement is in pitch darkness, I walk by touch, being pushed in the back. Obviously my comm channel is narrowed to its limit to prevent me from stealing anything else. All visual images are cut off.

– Stop! – I hear the command behind and freeze obediently.

Those who surround me can obviously see me absolutely well which doesn't make me feel better.

– You had the cheek to come here again Ivan?

I recognize Urman's voice or even the tone of his interpreter, and turn trying not to goggle my blind eyes.

– That was the deal.

– Oh really?

– You gave me the file voluntarily in exchange of the promise of the later meeting.

The pause, a pretty long one. I'm not lying and Urman finds himself in a stupid position. It's so good – not to lie. What for anyway? There's so much truth in this world that lies become unnecessary.

– What do you want?

– What do *I* want? Nothing. It was you who asked me for next meeting, so I guess you have something to offer?

Silence again. Obviously Urman wasn't expecting me to return after his attempt to trace me. I add just in case:

– Don't try to trace my channel by the way. Otherwise I'll leave.

The silence becomes too long and I can mentally see Urman ordering to his guards, "Hey, kick his ass…"

– Restore his channel completely, – orders Urman. – And stop the surveillance.

The bright light. I narrow my eyes studying the insides of the confinement through half-closed eyelids. Gloomy heavy walls, tiny reflecting glass windows behind the bars on top of them. The table and chairs around it located in the center of the room.

– This is a meeting hall, – explains Urman. He's dressed in a business suit with a tie. Maybe his dress is automatically adjusted according to the interior, I've heard about such tricks. – Here we conduct the Board of Directors' and some other meetings.

I see, the most secured place in the corporate virtual space. One won't escape from here as easily as from the veranda…

I have nothing to run away with though: I came absolutely unarmed.

– Leave us, – Urman continues ordering.

The guards submit immediately.

– Thanks Friedrich, – I say.

Urman nods silently and sits in one of the armchairs, I set myself nearby.

– So… Have you sold the… apple? – inquires Urman.

– Yes, thank you.

– I'm really glad for you.

It looks like he is not really angry and this makes me suspicious.

– I hope it haven't too much complicate the financial situation of the corporation?

– No, not really.

I look at Urman questionably.

– I forgot to tell you last time that the cool medicine has a tiny drawback, – notes Urman, – A side effect. We found it almost by chance… I suppose that Mr Shellerbach and Trans-Pharm-Group won't run into it.

I start feeling uncomfortable.

– Don't worry diver, it was not your responsibility to test the safety of the drug, – laughs Urman. – Nothing fatal, by the way… neither cancer nor terratogenious effect… but the patients won't be happy.

Al-Kabar have made a little insurance… I wonder what side effect might the cold reliever have? Changing the skin color into green, impotence, baldness? Urman won't tell.

Well, from now on I'll cure my cold with aspirin only for the rest of my life.

– Okay, let's forget mutual offences! – offers Urman generously.

I nod.

– As I told you before, I have an interesting offer for you… – says

Al-Kabar's director. – A permanent employment.

– No.

We look into each other's eyes. They say the eyes is the mirror of the soul. The question is whether our virtual bodies do have souls or not?

– Some divers do have permanent contracts, – notes Urman, – So… it means it isn't forbidden?

– No, it is not but there's a certain difference between working for an entertainment center or a virtual investigation bureau and the work for you. In a month or two or three you'll 'calculate' me.

– And you fear publicity so much, Ivan?

– Sure I do. We are the alchemists of the virtual world, the wizards. No normal princeling would ever let the alchemist out of the comfortable dungeon… so that he couldn't invent gunpowder for the enemies.

– So sad… – Urman doesn't argue. – In many points you're right, Russian diver. Excuse me but I know that. Your voice was processed by the analyzer and it was definitely not the interpreter program.

I don't argue with him either, such a peaceful and nice talk, we are so loyal to each other – what a beautiful look.

– Well then – I offer you a single time collaboration! – says Urman cheerfully, – The work is easy and we pay well.

– Do you really think it's so easy to get Unfortunate out from "Labyrinth"?

The bull eye! Right in the center! Urman's face twitches, then he takes his emotions back under control, just a tic under his left eye remains. One to zero! No, five to zero!

– Please explain me what do you mean? – asks Mr director unconvincingly.

– After you.

Either they'll kill me now or will open their cards.

Urman certainly can stand the blow.

– One of our corporation's fields of business is demographic control of Deeptown.

I shake my head – I didn't get it…

– I mean the number of virtuality's inhabitants at any moment of time, with exact precision, by district, building, space in space like ours.

– Why? Who gave you the right for this?

– It was a common decision, approved a year ago. – shrugs Urman, – In order to compare the load on separate servers, to tie these figures to exact time of day, all this allows to coordinate the work and to reduce the cost of virtual space usage. AOL was one of the main customers, smaller companies had joined too.

And again my neglect to open information puts me in a spot.

– We were controlling according to the number of input-output signals on servers, – Urman goes on, – It's very simple and reliable, very efficient. Servers report the figures every two minutes. Nobody's rights are violated while we can know the total number of people in virtuality. It's not a surveillance, just statistics.

I nod.

– The number of computer supported objects in each space fraction is being controlled in parallel. Thus we know how many people present in this or that part of virtuality. We get reports every two minutes as well. It's easy to understand that if we total the number of all active objects in all parts of virtuality we'll get the already known figure – the number of people that entered the Deep.

I understand.

– The figures didn't match?

– Yes. There's one person more in virtuality than it should be. Computers can see him, he functions in cyberspace but he never connected to the Net.

Urman rises, waves his hand and the huge screen unwraps on the wall, on top of concrete and steel mesh. I rise too. This is the map of Deeptown and its suburbs looking like sewn of tiny patches. Each patch is a server that supports this part of space. The fine red 'rash' is on top of patches, these are gates, phone lines which are used to enter the Deep.

Looks beautiful. All bourgeoises are window-dressers.

– We can check the data by districts, – informs Urman, – For instance…

He steps to the screen, reaches it and points at Al-Kabar's block with a finger. The numbers 1036/1035 flash up on the display above the screen.

– Is it clear?

– Your servers support 1036 people in your space, including me. And everybody except me are connected through Al-Kabar's own channels.

– Sure. It's too risky to let the secret information to pass through somebody else's lines, even if those are owned by most reliable providers. We have our own channels in 12 cities where our employees live.

– But you can't detect Unfortunate like that!

I pad to the map, find "Three Piglets" on it, bethink just in time and poke my finger to the nearby 'institution'. I was there just a couple of times and didn't like it, too noisy and pompous.

63/2

– This is the more common picture, right? There are 63 people

hanging in the restaurant's space but only two used its own phone channel to connect.

Urman nods.

– We detected "Labyrinth" by other means.

I don't consider that it's a cunning and not very friendly interlocutor before me anymore. I'm really curious how to figure out the means they used to detect the person that never entered the Deep.

– Okay… It's not feasible to trace every and each connection signal: too expensive, too time consuming and also forbidden.

Urman looks at me with such smugness as if it was him who solved the problem instead of ordering to do it to his specialists.

Let's think, it's useful sometimes.

Here we have a flow of electronic impulses. It's not important now where it came from. This is just data – the simple 3D image of a person, Unfortunate. It enters the computer that serves the "Labyrinth"'s 33rd level, either through the modem or directly into CPU. The computer places the image to the beginning of the level and gets prepared to control its movements, to broadcast its voice to other players, to calculate the effect of its shots, to move the gravels pushed by its feet. Well, and of course to send the images that the player sees with his left and right eye, the sounds that he hears, the pushes he feels through the virtual suit…

Stop – where to send if he never entered the Deep?

The glitch happens here. The computer processes Unfortunate's actions but doesn't know where they came from, and where to send the results. Can this be reflected on the server's performance figures? It should but on very specific ones, something like the ratio between the volume of CPU processed data and the data sent/received through the modem. One should look for this information beforehand in order to find the server with an uninvited guest in several hours…

– You were expecting him, – I say, – You knew that he will come!

– We assumed such possibility, – specifies Urman, – The person able to enter virtuality by himself should have appeared sooner or later.

– Without a computer? – I say these ravings which – how funny – will not seem the ravings for anyone far from computers and networks! This is as ridiculous as to imagine somebody who can connect directly to the phone line, it's just plain stupid.

But Urman might be all but stupid. He's a common millionaire who extracts incomes for Al-Kabar from everything: from the Earth's bowels, retransmitter satellites and runny noses.

– We are not alone to work on alternative means of interactions with computers, – says Urman, – Keyboard, mouse, helmet and suit – all these are the remains of pre-virtual era. The next step is direct

connection to the visual and hearing nerves. Plugs… – he rotates his finger by his temple, either doubting his sanity or trying to illustrate the socket implanted behind his ear. – But this way requires too much work on the society's mentality. It's much harder to break people's psychology than to drill the skull and to plug a chip into the brains. If we could avoid that… if we could to just enter virtuality… the world would turn over.

– And you want to turn it over so much?

Friedrich is serious.

– When the world turns over my friend, being the first who stands upside down is the most important thing.

I stay silent, I have nothing to say. Would I want to enter the Deep without computer? Without Vika behind my back? Without the fear before the virus weapons? Without interference on the phone line and without eternal pursuit for modems' speed?

Funny question, of course I would! But I just don't believe in this.

But I really want to believe.

– As far as we know, the divers on contract with "Labyrinth" have tried to drive Unfortunate out, – says Urman carelessly.

I nod, their intelligence works well. Just what wouldn't the dollars do if applied in the right time and in the right amount!

– …And also someone, known as Gunslinger, – adds Urman, – Also the diver, I assume?

– Yes, it was me.

Urman nods.

– Then I expect the promised explanations.

Maybe the best thing at this point would be to whisper "abyss-abyss" and to vanish but I just can't do that after Urman's sincerity. The hole in the skull is really much simpler than the hole in one's life principles.

– Soon after our first meeting I was forced to meet…

Urman raises the eyebrow.

– Yes, that's right, *forced* to meet a person whose name I don't know. He offered me to sort out the situation that emerged in "Labyrinth". He didn't explain any details. Only later did I understand that he was talking about Unfortunate.

– We call him Swimmer, – notes Urman, – in analogy with you gentlemen.

– Basically, that's it, – I say. I really hate to be interrupted.

– Was the reward promised to you?

– Yes.

– A big one?

– A huge one… – I can't help myself and add: – I'd say that you won't be able to offer me more.

Urman is very serious, the talk became a business one but he doesn't yet argue or try to prove Al-Kabar's coolness.

– How had that person found you and why exactly you?

– He organized the dragnet for the divers and I… had exposed myself a little.

– Do you have any ideas of his personality?

– Absolutely none, – I say honestly but maybe not honestly enough: Urman is silent, looking into my eyes questionably. Maybe my words are analyzed by the lies detector and somebody reports the results to him…

– Just one more detail. He knew about my visit… to you. And he was well informed about the talk that took place. The fact that you wanted to offer me the same job was also known by him.

Urman holds the blow. Hadn't he hold enough of them in his life? But the shaking eyelid can be seen on the mask of tranquility. It's always unpleasant to learn about the spy by your side.

– Thank you, diver.

I smile leniently. What a trinket… Let the two spiders twitch in their cobwebs…

– Can you tell anything about Swimmer?

I shrug.

– Nothing special. Just a person. Sometimes there was an impression that he has Deep– psychosis, he takes what's going on too seriously. Otherwise he's quite adequate.

Urman nods. It looks like they have managed to plug to "Labyrinth"'s computers seriously and to control the events. This makes me to ask:

– Have you tried to trace Un… Swimmer's signal anyway?

– There's no signal at all.

Either Urman suffers the sincerity attack or is really interested to persuade me completely…

– "Labyrinth"'s servers do not broadcast Swimmer's data, to neither direction. He… hangs on the level by itself.

So it's true… the human who entered the virtuality directly?

– "Labyrinth"'s administration still tries to trace his comm channel, – throws Urman in, – but according to our experts they'll make the same conclusions in five, or at most eight hours. Then the real panic will start.

I can imagine. The level will be isolated or maybe even the whole "Labyrinth of Death" will be freed of players. The direct tunnels to the 33rd level will be hacked hastily, if they don't exist yet doesn't mean that it's impossible to create them. All monsters will be turned off, all buildings will be frozen so that Unfortunate wouldn't be accidentally hit by the fallen brick. Then the crowd of psychologists, hackers,

officials, Anatol and Dick – all they will flow into the empty level, will surround Unfortunate with care and endearment, will bring him to the exit on their hands…

I can assume for sure that they won't need my help then.

– Do you agree to collaborate with us?

I look at Urman, he doesn't seem to joke.

– I'm already working for somebody whose name I don't know.

– He might promise you very much, that mysterious Mr X, but have he rendered you any assistance?

I shake my head.

– If you are really Gunslinger, you could realize that the ordinary methods are not applicable to Swimmer. A couple more attempts won't change anything. And then "Labyrinth" will be isolated and the… ride's… owners will start solving the problem.

He pronounces the word 'ride' with some obvious defiance.

– Whoever hired you, he did it not because of your diver's talents.

– Then why?

Now he have confused me.

– It would be much easier to buy "Labyrinth"'s divers or to hire a group. Yes, it's hard to figure your real names but it's quite possible to meet you and offer you a job. This is how you earn your living after all. Your mysterious employer was attracted by something more serious than just an ability to exit virtuality.

It seems I have all reasons to bloat in pride but I start feeling even more worried instead.

– And I think, – says Urman thoughtfully, – that he was right. Swimmer is the job for you. The main one in your life and I can help you to achieve a success.

Hardly can he offer me the Medal of Complete License. Whatever else, but *such* things can't be bought, but the bid is big and the reward might be very-very huge.

Why would I need the Medal if I can stop my unlawful activities in virtuality for the rest of my life?

– Have you signed the contract? – asks Urman.

– No.

– Just a verbal agreement?

– No.

– What worries you then?

I stay silent. I have no idea why do I cling to Man Without Face's offer. He forced me to meet him, he had sent me to "Labyrinth" without explaining anything. And his promise might be just a bluff too.

– I need to think.

– All right, – agrees Urman. – It's almost guaranteed that you have

five more hours… obviously you'll visit "Labyrinth" once more?

I nod indefinitely.

– I'll undertake my own measures, – says Urman, – You will definitely notice them diver and will be able to make your choice.

– Vague, Friedrich. { *In Russian 'vague' and 'foggy' is the same word* } Urman frowns in confusion while the interpreter program figures out that I'm not talking about the weather.

– Why on the Earth I'm so valuable to you?

– You'll find that out dear Ivan the Prince. Oh by the way, what is Swimmer's nationality, what do you think?

– Russian, – I reply mechanically.

Urman nods mockingly

– Maybe-maybe… See you later, diver. Think and make your decision.

As these words are spoken, the doors open and the guards enter but this time their swords are sheathed.

– You'll be escorted to the bridge, – informs Urman.

10

Either I'm not watched or this is being done skillfully enough for Vika to raise the alarm. I ascend the wall under the guards' looks and step onto the horsehair bridge.

How many meters will I be able to walk without exiting virtuality I wonder?

One step, another – the thread shakes under my feet, I feel dizzy. The blue bands of rivers and hot orange glow of lava lakes are hundreds of meters below, between conglomeration of cliffs.

– Hey diver, you're staggering! – the mocking call from behind.

I'm not just staggering, I'm falling down already.

Maybe this is how Moslem sinners fall down trying to pass into their Heaven, to tender houries and the mountains of rahat lakoum…

My feet slip, I fly, grab the thread and it indifferently cuts my fingers off. The air blows into my face coldly and strongly, inviting to my short journey, the cliffs rotate below, growing and showing needle sharp crests. When I touch the rocks, Al-Kabar's server will report that I'm under terminal accelerating forces and the exit deep-program will be launched.

But I'm not interested at all in what colors will be my death painted by my imagination.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours…

Blood on the screens, a familiar image.

I took off the helmet, leaned onto the table and pulled the phone cable from the socket.

– Communication breakdown! – said Vika, – No dialtone! Check the plug!

– It's alright, – I mumbled plugging the cable into place, – Restart.

– Seriously?

– Yes.

Blueish color and the falling human figure on the screen. And nasty feeling in my soul.

I'm stuck in the very serious matter. If Al-Kabar, "Labyrinth" and those who stand behind Man Without Face start fighting… Oy!.. It's better not to fall between such millstones. The best thing now would be to forget about virtuality for a couple of weeks, to play ordinary games, to drink beer with Maniac, to upgrade the computer, to travel somewhere to Antalia { *the Turkish resort, very popular in Russia* } where it's still warm, to swim in the sea.

Of course, I'll have to forget about Vika, the real one, and for a long time.

To bid a farewell to the dream about the Medal of Complete

License.

And certainly, to cross Unfortunate out of my memory.

Who is he anyway to worry about him so much? Homo Computeris? Computer human, able to enter virtuality without any phones-modems? So what? It's not worthy to hope that his ability – if it really exists – is so easy to acquire.

All kinds of specialists will study him, make encephalograms and measure all possible and impossible parameters. Unfortunate will be placed before various types of computers, they will turn modems on and off, bring him to the phone lines and hide him in underground bunkers. And they will demand – enter the Deep! Tell us what you feel! What feeling do you have in the thumb of your left foot when you enter virtuality and how does your stool change after three days in the virtual world… Thus will he spend the rest of his life somewhere in the heavily guarded estate in Switzerland or in the Texas desert, in some CIA research center. One very valuable and respected guinea-pig.

Maybe he's Russian though, a Russian citizen. If I throw the info about him in the open Net or to the proper authorities…

I even laughed of my own naivety. So what? Will the ole' good Russia really send its carriers and tank squads to guard Unfortunate? Wasn't it enough talented programmers taken out of the country – say, 14-year old Sasha Morozov, a guy from Voronezh was flown out by the charter flight. Just maybe our intelligence service would gather the remains of its past bravery and would intercept Unfortunate just in order to lock him forever in its own research center somewhere in Siberia or the Ural Mountains.

When the Deep was created, the Freedom was its banner.

We are independent of all corrupt governments, shabby religions and Puritan moral. We are free in everything – and forever. No information can be secret – and we have a right to discuss whatever we want. Freedom of travel can't be limited – and Deeptown will never know any borders. We'll fight for our right to have all rights. We'll purge only those from our ranks who will rise against the freedom.

Lord, how naive and enthusiastic were we!

The people of the new cybernetic world, of the free and unlimited space!

The people reveled in the freedom, playing with it as a kid risen from the bed after the long illness, cheerful and proud by ourselves. The Deep's interests – everything for it, for the name of it, forever… amen.

But why do I still believe in all these funny slogans with the same enthusiasm as I had being a kid, believing in communism?

Why do I want to believe so much, despite everything?

Breaking the laws, trashing someone else's computers, stealing someone else's 'intellectual property', not paying taxes to my poverty-stricken country, not trusting anybody except a handful of friends – and still to believe in something warm and fuzzy, clean and eternal? In freedom, kindness and love?

Maybe I'm just from the breed that can't live otherwise.

And well, nobody really prevents me from believing in freedom further, after I change my entrance channels and the Net address.

It's so simple – to believe.

I was looking at the 3D mesh of Norton's table, at the neat lines of directories and subdirectories. Three gigabytes, all completely full. Service programs, viruses-antiviruses, pieces of Vika's "consciousness", audio files and games, stolen data and new books, unpublished yet. Here is "Hearts and motors – in the travels again" by Vasiliev, here is a fresh mystery by Lev Kursky, prolific like piranha (?), here is Oldi's novel that have made so much noise. I can go out now, buy lots of beer, print a couple of books on my old LaserJet and land on the sofa. To sleep – as much as I can! And those Mr Urman whose real face I'll never see, and Mr Without Face whom I'll never see all the more can feel free to fight over Unfortunate with Willy-Guillermo…

I never liked stupid people and kamikaze.

I picked the phone from the case of my 'five' and dialed Maniac's number. I was lucky again, he was neither hanging in virtuality nor sleeping.

– Allo!

– Shura, it's me.

– Ah… – Maniac lowered his tone a bit.

– Are you busy?

– Well… a little.

– Writing a program?

– No, peeling potatoes… Galya is cooking.

– Congratulations.

– With what? – Maniac pricked up his ears.

– With your reconciliation!

– Ah… yeah… okay.

I'd better not abuse his time, especially after the recent rejoining with his spouse.

– Shura, tell me please, is it possible to enter "Labyrinth" with weapons?

– You mean the virus? Isn't BFG enough for you? – Maniac is obviously amused, – Your kidding. This is a space within a space, created with exactly defined purpose. It's easier to smuggle the virus into the Pentagon, then to pass through "Labyrinth"'s filter with it.

– Wasn't it you who made the filter for them?

– No, – confessed Maniac with regret, – Not me. But I know who and how had made it.

– So how?

– Your image is copied when you pass the portal. If you have any programs with you, any programs, those are cut off. Just your exact copy passes into the "Labyrinth"'s server.

– And there's no way to bypass? – I inquired helplessly.

– Think.

– Don't I have to think too much lately? – I growl, – Shura! Just tell me, can I break through the filter?

– Only walls can be broken… by foreheads, – said Maniac instructively, – What happened?

– Very lousy situation. Extremely lousy.

– Lousy for whom?

– For all the Deep. And for one good guy.

– And what about you? – asked Maniac directly and I remembered "Three Musketeers" involuntarily.

– Complete shit, believe me.

Maniac didn't reply at once, he even began to whistle something.

– Shurka!

– Will "Warlock-9000" be okay for you?

– What is that?

– A local virus. As usual.

– Will it pass the filter?

– Maybe.

– Shura, don't I distract you too much? I mean… from potatoes. – I said, possessed by the sudden guilt.

– No, I'm finishing already…

I don't like cordless phones, it's enough radiation for me already from my dear computer. As for Maniac – on the contrary, he can't imagine his life without them. And now also, he stands pressing the phone to his ear with a shoulder, tearing the peel off potatoes.

– Pour it in for me.

– Just to pour it in?

– Yeah, – I asked gathering all my impudence.

– Hold on, it's not that easy. What apps do you use to create your images?

– Various ones… "Bioconstructor"… "Morphologist"… "Guise".

– I see. What personality will you use when using the virus?

– Personality #7, Gunslinger…

– What is the file's extension?

– Huh? Extension? Hold on…

– Fire the terminal up, – said Maniac tiredly, – Set the complete

access for the password… say, "12345".

– One-two-three-four-five, – I repeat dumbly.

– In numerals! – specifies Maniac, – I'll tune everything by myself.

– Thanks!

– Not that fast… You'll owe me beer…

Maniac sighed one more time and threatened before putting down the phone:

– I'll call in 5 minutes. Your old girl in on already, waits for me and is as docile as a schoolgirl. Is that clear?

I rushed to the computer. In three minutes Vika agreed to submit to the one who calls with the password "12345" and moved over to the kitchen to cook myself a supper. I haven't even filled the teapot yet when the phone rang in the room and then connecting modem started whistling softly.

I'm stupid after all… and kamikaze.

Though, it's ridiculous to love myself too much, I can afford to be stupid for some time.

I just had time to drink some tea with jam found in the sideboard, then refilled the mug and returned to the room. Maniac was just disconnecting from my computer having left the burning red line on the screen: "Took some your old junk to read and play virus plugged in instructions by voice in a minute".

Maniac have carelessly omitted all punctuation.

Exited into Norton, I found the file of Gunslinger's image (it's extension was most trivial: .clt), and started to compare it to the other, unchanged images. Nothing have changed that I could have noticed.

As expected.

Maniac called in five minutes and quickly explained what and how I should do. I could only shake my head when I got just what did he do to my image "#7".

Obviously, "Warlock-9000" was something he was preparing for a long time, kept for the very special cases. If this thingy is used even once, hundreds of plagiarists will follow.

– Beer, beer and more beer… – I said turning the phone off. Nobody can tell though whether I'll be able to provide him this beer or not.

I was going to raise such a storm in the Deep which it haven't seen for quite a while.

The storm it deserved.

11

– The terminal is on, – reported Vika. I clicked the connection icon, and was on "Russia On Line"'s server in several seconds.

The address left by Man Without Face I remembered by heart: some Polish server which doesn't really mean anything. It's just a router, the signal will pass a couple or more countries on its way to Man Without Face.

There was no video support on that server, no drawn muzzles or animated photos on the screen. A severe styled menu in Polish and English, some ten more languages supported, including Romanian and Korean… no Russian. Our brotherly nation doesn't favor us too much, alas. I replied to operator's greeting and asked to establish connection with "Man Without Face" { *in English in the original* }. The operator switched to the Russian keyboard driver in half a minute and asked me to name the addressee in my native language.

"≈□□ъ□□□ □□□ □□ф□", – I typed in.

They started to throw me from server to server. The first two were open ones, I couldn't tell anything about the next three. Then I saw "Please hold" on the screen. In Russian by the way.

I was holding for fifteen minutes.

First five minutes quietly and modestly, then – getting a beer from the fridge and putting the old "Nautilus" album in the CD-player. Good singer Butusov is... until he starts trying to write the lyrics himself.

I remembered my dream, where was a singer on the stage and poor Alex, a prophet dream in some sense. But why did I imagine Unfortunate as a singer? Never had I any familiar musicians in my life, and risked to sing myself only in complete solitude.

"Who?"

I pulled myself to the screen and typed without much thinking:

"Me"

"How goes, diver?"

"I suppose you know that."

I would give very much to find out who is he – Man Without Face.

"Yes."

"I can't handle it."

"It's your problem."

"Not only mine."

A short delay – either Man Without Face was thinking or there was a lag along the lines somewhere.

"What do you want?"

"Help."

"I can't help. Everything you need is inside you."

If he was here, a real person, I would say something to him that is possible to say only or even better not to say at all. So I said that aloud but the Net has its own norms of communication and my fingers typed:

"Who is he?"

"You were told already."

The spiders. The spiders, stretched their thin threads into each other's dens. Urman watches after "Labyrinth" while Man Without Face controls Al-Kabar.

"Was that true?"

"Maybe"

"I CAN'T HANDLE IT!" – I typed in CAPs.

"Pity."

And almost instantly the line have appeared in the bottom of the screen: "Addressee have disconnected."

– Connection broke! – confirmed Vika, – Do you want to reconnect?

– No, – I replied. For some reason I didn't have any doubt: the Polish server won't connect me with Man Without Face again.

Maybe he feels offended that I've told about him to Urman. Maybe he have just lost faith in my abilities.

The result is the same in either case.

– Vika, am I smart? – I asked.

There's almost 1000 keywords stuffed into Windows-Home. Sometimes it's possible to make really funny talks with the computer... almost intelligent ones.

– What answer would you like to hear? – deviated Vika as usual when the words were not formulated as an order but were unclear to her.

– The honest one.

– I don't know Lenia. I really wish I could answer but I really don't know.

– Stupid you are, Vika.

– And you're a boor.

I laughed. If anybody not familiar with modern operating systems could hear me he would decide for sure that my Pentium is intelligent.

– Sorry, Vika.

– That's okay, I'm not angry.

Intellect and its fake... Where is the border between them? We already talk to our computers, they greet us and wish us good night. Many people including me spend most of their time in virtuality. But it's not a victory of the human intelligence, just a fake of the victory,

bright colored banners and fireworks above the void. Higher processor speed, more memory – and the computer gets human look and feel. But nothing more...

And Unfortunate – he can be a program too. Just as cunning as Maniac's virus, penetrated through the filter, rooted itself in the 33rd level's server, the one able to support the talk and to shoot the monsters.

– Shit!! – I shouted.

It's so simple! Just a hundred of phrases said sometimes in the right time, sometimes irrelevantly. The program that learns on its own words, returning you your own thoughts, obediently following its naive rescuers... Sure it doesn't need any comm channels.

What did I tell Unfortunate, what did he reply? I strained my memory.

I don't know... It might be a program. Then both Al-Kabar and Man Without Face were too wide of the mark.

Good if I'm right, the riddle is solved quite simply.

The Silence, Gunslinger...

I shivered, remembering the void that rolled over me after his words.

A program?

Unfortunate, carrying the drawn kid with such care...

A program?

– I can't understand a thing, Vika, – I said, – Absolutely nothing, and you can't help me.

– Can I help? – replies Vika inopportunely.

– No!

– Who can then?

I was silent for a while before replying.

– The real Vika. The Deep!

– Deep program start?

I put my hands on the keyboard instead of an answer.

Deep

Enter.

The darkness on the screens is lined by falling stars, the rainbow spiral whirling before my eyes, erasing reality, pulling me towards Deeptown's skyscrapers.

The first second is the most difficult one. The room is the same, but I know, all this is an illusion, a mirage.

– Is everything okay, Lenia?

I rotate my head. The room is okay. It's me who is different.

– Personality #7, Gunslinger.

– Acknowledged...

This time my appearance changes painfully long, nothing can be done, it's an inevitable cost of the weapon.

– Is everything okay Lenia?

I stand up and look at my reflection in the mirror.

– Yes. Thanks Vika.

I open the fridge looking for soda. Sprite is over, only Coke has left. It'll do.

– Good luck, Lenia.

– Thanks.

I drink the most popular beverage in the world greedily which – how funny – was created as a diarrhea relief... Urman estimated that I have five hours more, now only four have left. I can almost feel how somewhere in the great distance, on other continents, the various officials' brains screech in strain, starting to comprehend the Unfortunate's phenomenon. Very soon the 33rd level will be shut down, very soon the hunt for Unfortunate will start. It's not important whether he's a human or a program, I'll get him out.

– Call the taxi, – I say leaving the apartment. I descend in a small clean elevator and open the doorway.

An old Ford is waiting for me, the driver is a sleek young guy in a white shirt, an exact copy of the one that I killed two days ago before penetrating into Al-Kabar. I even feel shame looking at his friendly smile.

– Brothel "Any Amusements"! – I growl.

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It looks like Vika made Madam to establish a special status for me. When I enter the lobby, I see the three men in there. All three pull their heads up, in all three's eyes is confusion and fright. They don't see each other, two of them are even overlapping in space looking like some kind of ugly siamese twins.

These two are stately blue eyed brunettes, standard bodies from Windows-Home's kit, obviously put on for disguise. The third one is a swarthy robust guy with a cleanly shaved head. The common feature of all three is their look, the one of somebody caught being busy with pressing out pimples.

So, I'm now what, have the same rights as the brothel's employee? I can see all three customers, enter the service areas…

– Hi… – I say raising my hand limply. All three nod quickly. One of them puts aside the green album with artificial negligence, the other one casts the purple one aside. Only the shaved guy continues to look through the black album stubbornly, curiously studying the pictures.

I approach the guard, he opens the door before me obediently and I leave the lobby sparing the visitors from their soul tortures.

Nobody is going to escort me but I remember the way. The corridor is empty, some doors are opened. Bursts of laughter can be heard from behind one of them. There is a small pavilion surrounded by blossoming sakura, the gentle spring sun shines in the sky, the cone of Fuji is seen in the distance. Two girls are drinking tea inside, noticing me they wave their hands cheerfully:

– Hi Gunslinger, want some tea?

– N…no, – I mumble and walk away quickly. An absolutely naked girl steps out from the other door, without even a hint of shyness.

– Vika is busy! – she says, – Maybe you'll stay with me for a while? I'm boooored!

There's no hint in her words whatsoever and the thought about having sex doesn't excite her more than the process of inhalation-exhalation. There's something dreadful in the situation itself… in all those cheerful and friendly young girls.

I suddenly realize what do they remind me of, some old sci-fi book about merry young people who are busy with their favorite work, who spend days and nights at it, they are friendly, they are always ready to help their friend, they are unable to say a single bad word about each other…

It's like a distorted mirror, the false reflection. The evil had put on the dress of good and as strange as it may seem, it fit!

– Thanks, but I'd better wait in her room, thanks again… – I say smiling desperately.

The girl pouts sorrowfully and disappears in her room. I go further until my look meets with the black kitten's on the picture.

– Meow! – I whisper softly pushing the door. The kitten opens his tiny maw, mews in return and freezes again.

The mountain hut is empty, just the wind from the opened window flutters the short curtains. Leaned against the window-sill, I watch the mountains for quite a time. No, this is impossible, to create the whole world absolutely alone and not for fame and money, not at an order, just for herself and even never enter it!

To create it just in order to know that it exists, right here, behind the window: the sparkling snow on the mountain crest, the endless blue sky, rocks on the slopes, the black moss under pine trees, birds soaring in the skies and squirrels scurrying about in the trees. The world of silence, cleanliness and serenity, the world where the word 'filth' is not invented.

I think that Unfortunate would like it. I really hope he will like it.

– Lenia?

Vika enters quietly and it takes me by surprise.

– I'm sorry… didn't they tell you?

She shakes her head.

– I just wanted to be with you… for a little time, – I start make excuses involuntarily, – Are you… all right?

Vika nods.

– You shouldn't dive in the Deep so often, – I say approaching her, – have you at least had some snack?

– A little… It's a flood of customers today.

She doesn't look aside, she got used to consider this a work but it's something wrong with me. I can feel a cold lump in my chest, quick and pungent like a snow in the frost. I swallow some air and say:

– Do you really have to work so much… Madam?

Vika goes to the window and asks without turning back:

– How did you find out?

– I felt it.

– Leave Leonid. Leave forever, okay?

– No.

– Why the hell do you pester me? – shouts Vika turning back, – Why the hell would you need a prostitute as a friend? Get out! I like that, okay? I like to fuck a hundred of times a day, to change bodies, to order the girls around and to pretend that I'm one of them! Is it clear? Is it?

I just stand there waiting for her to vent it out, then pad closer

and stand by her side by the window.

I can't talk now and can't touch her, but it's dangerous to stay silent either, though I have no choice and I wait for I don't know what.

The mountains start and the floor begins to shake under the feet. Vika shouts clinging to the window-sill, I grab her by the shoulder and set the second hand against the wall. The earth is quivering, the white mountain caps start flowing with a white smoke, stretching down tentacles of avalanches. The huge rock whirls down by the window.

– Mommy… – whispers Vika sinking on the floor, looks like she is more excited than scared, – Duck, Lenia!

I fall down beside her and just in time – a good load of stony shrapnel blows into the window.

– Fifth degree at least! – shouts Vika, – Seventh!

– Eighth! – I suggest. Hardly had she ever seen the real earthquakes, otherwise she wouldn't be so cheerful now.

The hut's floor is still shaking but much less now, with a small convulsive shiver.

– Cool, – whispers Vika sprawling on the floor. I catch her look and touch her cheek gently, – Don't be mad at me Lenia.

– I'm not.

– The customers… piss me off sometimes.

– The Cap? – I remember.

– Exactly.

– Who is he?

Vika shrugs.

– I don't know. He wears different bodies and doesn't tell anything about himself. He only… – she smirks, – always wears a cap. That's why his nick.

– Is he a sadist?

– Yes, maybe… but a special one.

Her lips whisper a short obscenity.

– You what, accept any customers here? Even those who make you climb the walls?

Vika stays silent.

– I thought you sort out the worst idiots. If it's possible to identify Cap beforehand…

– We accept everyone.

– What is it, a kind of the company honor? "Any Amusements"?

– You might assume that.

Looks like the earthquake is over, I rise and look into the window. Avalanches still move, the river below is blocked by landslide and fills in slowly, searching for the new bed.

– It calmed down, – I whisper involuntarily, as if my words can

wake the nature up again, – Vika, why did you make the earthquake?

– I don't have anything to do with it. This world lives by itself, I don't have any control over it anymore.

– Not at all?

Vika glances at me, rises and studies the changed landscape.

– Absolutely. The world becomes real only when it gains freedom.

– Just as a human.

– Sure.

– Do you believe in freedom so much?

– You don't have to believe in freedom. When you have it, you can feel it yourself.

I think I expected her to say these words.

– Vika, what if some man… a good man is in trouble… If he can lose his freedom forever… would you agree to help him?

– I would, – she replies calmly, – Even if he's not that good a man. This is a principle of a sort if you want.

– I need to hide somebody.

Vika shakes her head in some funny manner, so that her hair scatter on her shoulders.

– Lenia, what are you talking about? Hide where?

– In virtuality.

– What for?

– He can't exit.

– You're talking about the one in "Labyrinth"?

– Yes.

– Lenia… – Vika holds my hand, – How long ago were you in the real world?

– Half an hour ago.

– Really? Don't you need some help yourself? I have… – she bites her lip, – one familiar diver. It's true, they really exist!

How funny…

– Do you want me to ask him to meet you?

– Vika…

She calms down.

I'm not used to such care, to be honest. This is my profession – to take care of people who got lost in virtuality.

– I'll help, – says Vika, – But you're wrong… I think.

I don't have time for arguments now.

– Thank you. Are your security systems reliable enough?

– Quite. Do you understand something in that?

I nod. Of course, I can't create the security program myself but I had to break those so many times that it's high time to consider myself an expert.

– You can talk to the Wiz about that.

– Will he tell me?

– Not to you, and neither to me, but to Madam…

Vika hesitates and looks at me as if asking to leave. I go to the door, but she calls:

– Lenia.. Don't. I want you to look.

She pads to the wall, waves her hand and the boards part, opening a small door.

It's a light behind it, a cold bluish lifeless light. Vika's silhouette stays in the doorway for a second, then disappears inside and I follow her even if I don't want that at all, like hypnotized.

It's a shed. Or a morgue. Or Blue Beard's museum.

Shiny nickel coated hooks stick out from the walls, human bodies hang on them, almost reaching the floor with their feet, girls for the most part, light and dark haired, several reddish ones, one is completely bald. Also several middle-aged women and a couple of old ones, several girls and boys.

All eyes are opened and empty.

– This is my costumier room, – says Vika. I stay silent, I can understand that anyway.

Vika walks along slightly rocking bodies, looking into the dead faces, whispering something as if in greeting. Madam is hanging somewhere in the end of the first dozen. Vika looks back at me making sure I'm watching and snugs close to the splendid body of the brothel owner, hugs it as if in the outburst of perverted passion.

Nothing happens for a second, then – I can't catch the moment of change

– Vika and Madam change places. Not Vika but Madam backs from the helplessly hanging body.

– That's it, – says Madam in her low voice.

– Why… in such a disgusting way? – I ask, – These hooks… this morgue… why? Vika?

Madam looks at Vika, nods sadly:

– Vika my dear, why? Should we explain to Lenia?

Vika, threaded on the hook by her nape stays silent.

– In order to never forget, Leonid. Not to forget for even a second – they are not alive.

I look at Madam, far more calm and wise than Vika, and if to approach it unbiased – much more beautiful.

– You had to see it, – says Madam.

– I have.

We exit the 'human meat warehouse' through the other door, the one that leads into Madam's room. This is a completely different world. There's a noisy and crowded beach behind the window, the hot sun in the sky, the room itself is full of luxurious old furniture, books

are scattered everywhere along with opened candy boxes, clothes, cheap jewelry and golden bracelets, half-empty perfume bottles, playing cards. The huge bed under the plush canopy is uncovered, the slipper is lying under it. A variety of started bottles is in the sideboard, the dusty guitar hangs on the wall, Persian carpet on the floor is bitten by moth and is stained with wine in patches.

– Now you can try to guess which me is a real one, – says Madam.

I ain't going to. There's no other truth in the world except the one we want to believe in anyway.

We don't stay in Madam's room for long and I'm glad about that very much, it's too stiffly in there.

– Lenia, sometimes I tend to think that you're just a young boy, – says Madam, – one can't be so naive after all.

– Why not?

– It's too hard to live that way.

– Nobody had promised me it'll be easy.

I walk by Madam's side thinking about how could we look from the side. A pale and tall Gunslinger fits to be Madam's son in his age but there's no resemblance between them. Maybe it must look like a disguised aristocrat 's visit to the cheap brothel.

– Steep stairs here, – warns Madam.

– I remember.

We enter the recreation area and the girls under umbrellas greet Madam with cheerful squeals. The gay splashing in the water just by the shore quickly stands up and waves his hand. The tousled head of Computer Wiz pokes up from behind the bar and ducks back down quickly.

– You see, Vika is not here, – says Madam to me loudly, then protectively puts her hand on my shoulder, – Girls, Gunslinger will wait for his girlfriend here! Don't hurt him!

The general meaning of the answers summarizes to the idea that they'll hurt me for sure but I'll like that. Madam waves her finger at the girls, then goes to the bar. The Wiz appears at once, as if feeling her approaching.

– Talk to Gunslinger, – Madam asks him gently, – He has some questions… answer all of them.

– Absolutely all? – inquires Wiz.

– Absolutely.

– Well Madam, don't say later that I forced this out of you.

– I wish it was necessary… – sighs Madam.

I'm waiting for Wiz by the table which stands a little aside from the others, the girls don't need to hear our talk.

– Champaign! – declares Wiz, approaching me, – Hi Gunslinger! You're drinking champaign, right? I don't, it's too many bubbles in it,

my stomach rumbles after that!

He moves in an odd manner, very smoothly as if being on asphalt. I glance at his feet, they don't touch the sand: the shabby slippers are on Wiz's feet, with tiny wings growing from their sides that hammer the air quickly.

– I'm drinking champaign with the girls only, – I refuse, – Do you have vodka over there?

– Everything is there! – Wiz plops the bottle of caustically violet colored liquor on the table and runs away with unclaimed Abrau-Durso. Just in a minute he returns in the same gliding manner with a bottle of Ursus vodka, a crystal pitcher filled with water and a package of Zuko.

– Here, mix that…

I never tried Ursus but it's a good vodka as they say. Hoping that subconsciousness will work out the taste for me, I pour in a cup. Wiz grabs the pitcher and mixes the beverage by himself using his own hand as a mixer.

We're in virtuality after all… mo germs here. I swallow the vodka in one shot and take a mouthful directly from the pitcher, then ask:

– Where did you get this cute footwear from?

– These slippers? Ah, made them myself today… was sick and tired of bogging in the sand. You like them? You see, in Deeptown it's possible to walk on the floor only. So I had to glue a piece of floor to the soles. It's no problems now: walk on air as long as you want, until tired!

Wiz laughs and makes several small steps, ascending almost to the table level, then crosses his legs, falls into the armchair, opens the liquor and drops to the bottle with a smacking sound.

– Superb thing! – he declares, – Sweet-sweet! Real Cura ao!

– Do you spend the whole day here?, – I inquire.

– Whole day? Ha! I exit this place to eat something, and pardon me, to visit bathroom!

– Madam says, all security here depends on you.

– Wrong word! Everything depends on me here.

– May a stranger enter here?

– And how could we earn the living if we wouldn't let them in?

– I'm not about that. Is it possible to penetrate into the brothel's service areas?

– Institution's! This is not a brothel, but Institution! No, it is not.

– Absolutely?

Wiz sighs and becomes more serious.

– Are you hacker or lamer?

– A 'newbie'.

– Okie, I see… The absolute security doesn't exist. The closer

you're to the absolute reliability, the less comfortable you feel in virtuality. It's a quadratic dependence here – your ability to receive and to transmit data falls as the security level becomes higher. The most important thing is to find the optimal ratio between comfort and security. Our security system was created with the elements of artificial intelligence. When breaking attempts are detected, the warning is broadcasted, additional passwords are implemented, dummies are activated…

– Dummies?

– Autonomous mobile security programs, phagocytes. I call them dummies, they are all dumb. Why don't you drink?

I pour myself more.

– If an intensive attack happens, – Wiz goes on, – then the degree of security grows unlimited, up to the complete encapsulation of the Institution. Of course it never happened before, but it's meant to work this way.

– So you want to say that the security IS ideal after all?

Wiz hesitates, the vanity which he obviously has struggles with objectivity.

– No… If the big group of professionals would plan the break-in, they'll be able to enter before the defense starts to work in full volume. But who on the Earth would want to do that, huh?

I understand that it'd be stupid to expect any different answer. There's a sword for any shield.

– Thank you, Wiz.

– Ah, don't mention it! – he waves his hand, – Do you want to make your own security system? Drag it in here, I'll help. Or better yet, let's go to your place! – Wiz fires up, – I'll do everything myself, I'm so bored of sitting here!

I shake my head, he guessed wrong.

– I'm just interested in how it's handled here.

– Ah, you're the auditor? – starts Wiz, – Hushhh… I've got it, I'm quiet… Why haven't Madam told me immediately?

Who might audit the brothel I wonder? What for? Very interesting… but I don't dare to question Wiz any more.

– Okay, time to go… and Vika must have freed already. – I say. Wiz becomes solemn and serious instantly:

– You watch it, don't hurt her!, – he warns, – she is… a great girl, I'd kick anyone's ass for her.

Wiz sighs and looks at the sea dreamily.

– I have just wanted to score her but you were the first… – he confesses, – You know, she had a great crush on me… or maybe even still has… but don't worry, I never take girls from my friends.

Some time ago I thought that the soap opera computer guys are

completely fictional characters. Hah! If it just was really so. They do really exist.

– But don't you even think to approach that blondie! – he adds, – She's so desperately in love with me, she suffers that for almost half a year…

The poor girl laughs aloud hugging her friend, not suspecting about her ill fortune.

– Or maybe I'd go after Natashka… – thinks Wiz, – they're all such lovable types here!

He picks up his liquor and moves towards the laughing blonde in a dancing walk, while I use the moment to get out.

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I must have done a couple more turns on the spiral stairs than necessary and descend into the lobby. The recent visitors are not here anymore, they must be enjoying the life's pleasures already.

Just one guy stands by the table browsing through the black album, short and stooping, with a face like of a famished marmot, with long strands of hair breaking loose from under the cap that's hung low above his eyes. I almost pass him going to the door into the service area when I get it. In the meanwhile the guy had put the album back and started to move towards the door.

– Hey, Cap! – I call him.

He stops and turns around slowly, his eyes are empty and as cheerful as the ones of the boiled fish.

– You're Cap, – I repeat.

No reaction whatsoever, the guy goggles at me absolutely blankly.

– I don't like you! – I say with a sudden joy, – Do you hear me? I don't like you at all!

– 'Haha' three times, – replies Cap averting his pale gaze and turns to the door again. He doesn't have any curiosity at all. He's a compatriot at least.

– Stop! – I shout into his back and he stops, waiting indifferently, – You shouldn't return here anymore, – I say.

Cap smirks – the first emotion on his face, but it looks so mechanic as if I'm talking to a program instead of an alive person.

– What do you want here?

Looks like it's the question that he's ready to answer.

– Some collective psychology research.

– Conduct it elsewhere.

His pale eyes examine me from feet to the head.

– Do you work here?

– No.

– You're mutant then.

I feel myself lost after such a weird characteristic and Cap explains:

– The loss of social and ethical orientation. Personality decomposition. What an inevitable and disgusting metamorphosis.

Already opening the door, he adds:

– Boring…

…Vika's voice reaches me by the exit:

– Leonid, wait! Don't!

It's quite difficult to get back to my senses. I realize that my right

hand clings to the belt and the left one squeezed in a fist. I look at Vika feeling how my fury slowly fades.

– Was it Cap? – I define just in case.

– Yes.

– I think I'm starting to understand your reaction.

– Have you cooled down already? – inquires Vika, – Good boy. Let's go.

I'm already feeling uncomfortable of my recent outbreak. Strange, I never thought it's so easy to start me, by in general quite meaningless words.

– Who is he, Vika?

She feels that she'll have to answer this question.

– Nothing special. Just a person who thinks he has a right to judge everyone around.

– Virtual prostitutes for instance?

– Not only. I know a couple more places where Cap conducts his experiments.

– He said something about psychology…

These words amuse Vika for some reason:

– The person that is unable to be creative always tries to justify his destructive behavior. Very often this is done in a form of aloof watching of the world's imperfections, especially ones such as our brothel…

We enter the door from which the black kitten is smiling, and Vika goes on:

– Psychology is a very simple science according to the general opinion. People aren't able to hammer the nail in by themselves or to rhyme at least a couple of lines never doubt in their ability to understand – and to judge others. In extreme cases it becomes the essence of their lives and the source of self-confidence.

– Who are you, Vika?

– A psychologist. PhD, if you want to know.

She sits down, sweeps the gravel from the table. The room obviously needs cleaning after the earthquake. Since there's no second chair here, I just squat nearby.

– And your Thesis' subject is?…

– "Abnormal behavioral reactions' sublimation in the virtual space environment".

As if in apology, she adds:

– It's common to formulate this way.

I see…

– You're studying those like Cap? – I ask, – The real hunter for the fake ones?

– No, and for a long time by now, Lenia. It was interesting to

study for half a year or more. But now – all they are similar, that Cap and others alike. All pathologies are the same and if you know one psychopath, you can guess the behavior of thousand of them.

– Then why?..

– Because they exist. The destruction that comes out of them can hurt just a couple of people here. In the real world they'll leave a trace of broken lives, poisoned love, ridiculed friendship after them. Maybe even blood. But here they are harmless, all their arrogance, animal reactions and self-conceit is just a dust, dust on the wind.

– But it's hard for you here!

– So what? It's not real me who is hurt but a drawn one.

– Vika…

– I beg you – don't meddle in the Institution's business. Otherwise Madam will cancel your access.

She smiles and I feel confused.

– Okay, I'll not meddle in the Institution's business inside it.

– What about outside?

– This is a matter of my personal freedom.

Vika parts her hands.

– Leonid, how old are you?

– What about exchange? – I ask quickly, – Information for information?

Nobody does advertise their biographical data in virtuality but Vika doesn't have any idea how much am I not used to it.

– Okay Leonid. I'm 29.

Before I answer, I have time to rejoice.

– 34.

– I'd never think that, I'd give you just a little more than twenty.

It's not necessary to mention that my fears were quite opposite.

– Virtuality is deceitful.

– No, virtuality is like an ice, we freeze into it once and forever. It's impossible to take off our first mask. We can invent hundreds of bodies afterwards, but that, very first one will be evident always.

– Madam was your first mask?

Vika picks the purse from the table, takes the cigarette from it and lights it.

– Yes Lenia. We had got a grant for the research of human sexual behavior in virtuality, the Westerners were a little crazy about that… at least one third of all information in the Net was tied to sex somehow. So I've invented this personality – a brothel owner, self confident, experienced, the one who saw everything in this life.

– You were successful, – I admit.

Vika exhales the smoke and asks with a slight irony:

– Maybe I'm really like that deep inside, how do you know?

– I don't care.

I'm lying of course but Vika doesn't argue.

– Did Zuko reassure you?

– Almost.

– He's a good specialist. You can confidently bring your friend here.

I look at the watch, there's still some time left.

– It's not that easy, Vika. It's very important to guess right and come to fetch him in time.

– You hackers are funny folks, – says Vika. How interesting. Geez! I was considered a cool programmer.

– Will you allow me to sleep here for a while?

– What?

– To sleep. I'm in the Deep for almost 24 hours while it'd be better to work with a 'fresh' head.

Vika – how wonderful – approaches this business-like.

– Do you want me to wake you up?

– Yes, in two hours.

– Sleep, feel yourself at home, I'll wake you up myself.

She pats me on the head, the gesture that would fit Madam better but I'm pleased anyway. She nods at the bed and exits through the door that leads into costumier room. In a minute Madam will come out and will go to order the girls around.

In the meantime I do something not very polite, I get a spool with a thin thread from my jacket's pocket, the little weight is tied to the end of it.

The wind doesn't calm down outside the window, the thread is waving but I let it go to the end nevertheless. When the weight touches the slope I glance at the thread: each meter is marked with red paint.

Seven and a half meters (~24 feet). Bed sheets won't help here. Ah well, there must be some ropes in the brothel, at least in the rooms intended for sadomasochists.

I throw the spool outside feeling a little uncomfortable but convincing myself that most likely Vika would allow this little experiment. Haven't she said to feel myself at home anyway?

I plop down at the narrow bed, right on the comforter and close my eyes. But just before I allow myself to fall asleep, I exit virtuality anyway and order Windows-Home to wake me up in two hours.

The sleep comes almost instantly. For some reason I hope to see something prophetical and with a plot again, like as it was the last time when Alex shoot Unfortunate but what I see is a complete mess.

The rainbow shining above Deeptown, its blinding bright flashes look like deep program, but this rainbow is built of ledges, it's the

biblical stairway to Heaven. I walk along it just as Computer Wiz in his slippers. I realize that the colors have different density – I fall in being on violet and blue layers, lean against the green ones slightly and step against the yellow ones confidently. The city below me is colorful and bright, I can see it through the multicolored mist.

I even know in my dream why do I ascend into the sky. Somewhere up there is a crystal dome of the Deep which had divided the world in two. I must break it, either using the Maniac's weapon or with my bare hands, no matter. The crystal would crack and stream down on the city, in a blinding bright star rain, because the stars are undoubtedly made of crystal, of a pungent crystal that reflects the light of our eyes.

And then something would happen; maybe the stars will burn us or maybe they'll have time to cool down and will fall right into the hands set below. I don't know for sure what do I want.

It's just most important not to make a mistake and to strike right in time. This time had already been defined, the time when I'll be able to turn the barrier into millions of crystal stars, it have almost come, the time…

– It's time… Time, Leonid.

I open my eyes accompanied by Windows-Home's whisper, a couple more seconds passes until I finally realize where am I. A moment later Vika enters.

– You're awaken already?

I nod, sit down on a messy bed and rub my forehead. The head is heavy, I had to either sleep more or not to sleep at all.

– I'll make coffee, – says Vika.

Leaned against the wooden wall I watch her. She takes a small sack with coffee out of the dark sideboard, dark not because of dirt but because of its age, then grinds the beans with a small manual polished brass coffee grinder, lights the fire with experience. I can smell the dry pine wood, boiling coffee and some abstract, not medical cleanliness… either the one of a water in a mountain stream or the one of the hot sand under the sun.

So good.

I can whisper my rhyme and exit into reality, to make a real coffee and even to spice it with remaining cognac, to wash my face with a cold water.

I'll be damned if I do that.

Everything is real here: the clean air, the live water, coffee grounds on the bottom of a cup, Vika's caring look. Outside there's only an abandoned dusty room, dampness and rotten water from the faucet.

… Too often do I feel that suicidal wish to become just as

everybody lately …

– Some cognac? – asks Vika and pours me a little cup of Achtamar.

– I have five more minutes, – I say, – Then… it'll be time.

– You'll return not alone?

– I hope so.

– Take your friend by the hand when you enter, in this case he'll be given privileged status too. I'll ask Wiz.

– Thanks.

– You'll thank Madam for that. Everything depends on her.

– We're good friends with Madam, she'll allow that. – I smile.

I have time to drink two cups of coffee and two cups of cognac before my time really runs out.

I have to go.

Vika starts to clean the room when I exit, and involuntarily I remember fake families that started to appear more and more often as of late, all these couples that live in different cities renting common apartments in Deeptown. They say that they love to do house work, to vacuum clean and to do laundry – as if imitation of common life would make their union a real one.

"Do you have a family?"

"Yes. My wife is a prostitute, we have a small mountain hut in the brothel. You're welcome to visit us, she'll make a great coffee. It's always clean in our place, even after the earthquake."

I start feeling dread, just because such picture doesn't irritate me at all.

The situation requires an urgent solution, any solution.

I lag along the street to the entrance portal, pass by a small pavilion of some airline company with a bored operator inside. The beggar is perched by the pavilion, this is also some new phenomenon – paupers in virtual space, they weren't here just a month ago.

The beggar is clean but ragged and scraggy, his figure is a bit transparent and moves jerkily – it's how they try to demonstrate the low modem speed and the weakness of the software.

– Help me… – moans the beggar. { *In English in the original* }

– The God will give, – I inform him.

– Mr Hacker, at least one dollar… – cries the beggar behind my back.

They say that the majority of those beggars are Russians. They say that none of them needs money, this is just a new fun for the "New Russians", a rare amusement, to beg, to be in the pauper's skin for some time. It's like a fashionable and effective psychic therapy. Maniac once swore that he managed to glue a marker on one of such beggars who turned out to be a director of a big bank.

– I worked for Microsoft, – mumbles the beggar lagging behind, – Once I called Windoze a buggy proggy and praised OS/2. Bill Gates had personally fired me the next day and included me in the black list. I was a cool hacker… Look how low did I sink…

– What interruption is your modem hung to? – I shout turning back to him, – What does the display of the message "Press this button to begin" in Windows-Home depends on? Three best ways to freeze Windoze? Who invented texture graphics? The best protocol for the modems manufactured by….

The beggar flees.

Looks like Maniac was telling the truth.

But at least these amusements are less dangerous than the car races that were stylish among Neuve riches a year ago. That was the reason for the private cars to be forbidden in Deeptown, after which Deep-Transit had triumphantly occupied the transportation service niche.

The encounter with the beggar amuses me and by the time I approach the "Labyrinth"'s portal I have a completely different mood: a battle-like one.

The crowd is dense as usual, "Labyrinth" is still functioning which means that everything was calculated correctly, but the fear to run into the shut door at the last second doesn't let go of me. I elbow through the players in hurry and only when I type in my code and enter the 33rd level I finally calm down.

Let's begin!

I'm Gunslinger!

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It's windy on the level. The metal cabin of "American Hills" squeaks, rocking, half slid from its rails and hanging above the very head of Unfortunate.

Great, one more mean of death is found.

– Hey! – I shout, approaching him, – It's me!

Unfortunate raises his head, maybe it's a good sign.

– Bored?

I sit down by his side and Unfortunate takes off his respirator himself, looks at me tiredly and hopelessly.

– Are you a human or a program? – I ask directly. Unfortunate shakes his head: go ahead and understand the negation the way you want…

– Do you know that you've got the nick 'Unfortunate'? – I say, – But you know man, even biblical Iov was more lucky than you! Your bad luck is something really unique!

Finally he replies:

– This is not only my… bad luck.

– Do you want to say you were rescued bad?

I'm talkative and bucked up like after a good drink, I need to stir up Unfortunate a little and, as stupid as it might sound, I need to become sure that he's not a program.

– I was rescued well. It's that just nobody could cross the border.

– What border?

– Of consciousness.

Unfortunate is patient in his explanations, but so what? They don't clarify anything.

– Let's go away from under this shit, – I nod at the rocking cab, – We have very little time.

– You won't be able to anyway… – whispers Unfortunate but stands up submissively and moves aside.

– We'll see, we'll see…

I'm waiting for I don't know what… for the action promised by Urman, for the level's shutdown?

– Unfortunate… may I call you that? Do you like poetry?

Silence.

The program might imitate the talk, making answers from my own words, but no program can create anything by itself.

– "My uncle's a man of honest rules", – I recite, – Go on! Huh? Unfortunate?

He looks back at me with such an irony that I feel uncomfortable:

– "… When seriously fallen ill…" Say Gunslinger, do all Russian

divers know only Pushkin by heart?

– Anatol'?

– Yes. He "remembered the wonderful moment".

I could just laugh at my own stupidity, at all those clich s hammered into mind. Instead I ask, feeling as something breaks inside, either the notorious 'border' or just a common sense:

– Well, what did Dick read you? Shakespeare?

– Carroll, – the answer comes from behind.

Dick stands close, Anatol in some 5 meters away, with BFG at the ready.

– Just as you, I sat by his side, – says Dick, – I sat down…

He sits facing indifferent Unfortunate and says: { *in English here* } Twas brilling, and the skithy toves Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.

I wait in fascination, and Unfortunate goes on:

All mimsy were the borogoves, And the mome raths outgrabe.

From the huge distance I hear Windows-Home squeaking in warning and whispering:

– Impossible to translate! It doesn't present in the main dictionary! Impossible to translate!

Dick looks up at me and asks:

– So Unfortunate is Russian according to your opinion?

Didn't Urman ask the same question?

– Who are you? – I ask Unfortunate. He smiles and rises, – Who the hell are you?! – I shout.

On vstal pod derevo i zhdet I vdrug graahnul grom…

– says Unfortunate.

Anatol laughs and goes on:

Letit uzhasnyj Barmaglot I pylkaet ognem!

{ *a part of one of Russian translations* } A real psycho clinic, and I'm the dumbest patient in here.

– Get out diver, – orders Dick, – The rescue games are over, everything is much more serious than you might think.

As if in confirmation of his words, a thick mechanic siren roar sounds, so strong that my ears start aching. Then the silence falls, only alarmed monsters boo, scream and chirp. A female voice falls from the sky, covering all sounds:

– Attention! Vnimanie! To everybody located on the 33rd level of "Labyrinth of Death"! You must leave the game area immediately! This is an official warning! You have 30 seconds to exit the game area! You may use your weapons to commit suicide and to return to the "Labyrinth"'s column hall. All necessary explanations will be provided, reimbursements will be paid. Attention! To everybody…

– Do you need help? – asks Anatol aiming his BFG at me, – Or maybe you'll do it yourself?

– You'll hurt Unfortunate too, – I say and Anatol nods, throws BFG aside and takes the rocket launcher instead.

But right at this moment I tear out the leather Gunslinger's belt from under my overalls. It's just an ordinary belt – as long as it stays on my body.

Once in my hand, the leather strip shrinks with a boom, stretches in length, enveloping itself into blueish sparks. Maniac have made Warlock-9000 in a form of lash. One stroke – and the lash outstretches, greedily trying to break free from my hand, the end of it strikes against Anatol's armor.

The blue fiery stream flows along the lash, sucking into Anatol's body. This is a real battle weapon, for it there's no difference between the armor or bare flesh. The diver disappears in the swirl of purple flames, falls through the ground. The whirlpool doesn't calm down though. The fiery crater buzzes, slowly becoming wider.

– You! – shouts Dick, – You've smuggled the virus!

Our faces are colored by the blue glow, Unfortunate looks at the growing twister in enchantment. I just nod, the words are unnecessary.

– Fifteen seconds… – says the voice from the sky.

– You've hit Anatol! You've broke the Diver's Code! – Dick doesn't attempt to take the weapon and I'm glad he doesn't: I don't want to kill him.

– Everything is much more serious, – I repeat his own words.

The new sound comes – the sound of breaking glass, crashing walls, squeaking of the metal being crumpled.

The silvery ring falls down from the purple clouds, the darkness following it, as if the giant glass is covering the 33rd level. I would think that this is how the level's encapsulation looks like if there wasn't terror and confusion on Dick's face.

Al-Kabar have entered the game.

But Dick blames me in everything, he tears the carbine from his shoulder – and I react without thinking. The lash hits his neck, beheading him with enthusiasm of unemployed butcher.

One-two! One-two! The grass ablaze!

Vzee-vzee… the grazing sword…

– says Unfortunate.

I grab him by the shoulders and push towards the fiery crater. The new twister grows where Crazy Tosser was behind our backs.

– Why? – asks Unfortunate.

We must hurry up. Now, when "Labyrinth"'s and Al-Kabar's hackers fight over the 33rd level it's a high time to flee. Warlock is not only the killer, it's also a tunnel drilled through the Deep.

– In order to return! – I shout pushing Unfortunate into the blue

flame and jumping after him.

The fire.

We are falling.

The spiral of blue fire is a tunnel wall, the violet mist is its flesh.

The foggy mirrors appear under our feet, we break them as we fall, the faces in the mirrors are like shadows, the spaces like pale watercolors.

Ruined railway station of the first level… the hospital of the 21st… the Cathedral of the 50th! I even can see the grinned muzzle of the Alien Prince, a fiery blink from his on-shoulder rocket launcher – but we have flown by already.

Deeptown street – faces of passers-by, the hood of a taxi, the ad "Only after you work for…"

The bookstore – the rainbow of covers, the girl in glasses looking through the magazine, rustling of pages like thunder in my ears, the guy at the cash register…

Blue lightings crawl along my arms.

Unfortunate in the cloud of greenish fire.

A supermarket – an orange jam jar blinks past my eyes – empty.

A pet shop – a white bunny in the cage.

Are there hallucinations in the Deep I wonder?

"Warlock" must calm down, the counter of passed spaces is built into it but Maniac didn't promise that it'll work properly. He didn't have a chance to test the virus.

A valley, unbelievably flat, burnt, four vehicles crawling across it…

Either clouds or just a sea of white down, crystal trees until the horizon, white-haired old man in the ground long chlamys looking after us un confusion, sounds of harps…

The purple and black whirl, low rumbling roar, sulphurous stench and steel sparkling in the dark…

Blue discharges pierce through us, every hair on the skin scratches and stings as if rooting into the body…

A green clearing with a small puppy running across it, crazed by enthusiasm and energy, yelping behind our backs.

Stop Warlock, stop already!

A stormy sea, the stars in gaps between the clouds, salty taste on the lips, a tiny yacht sliding down the wave, a boy naked down to his waist clinging to the cordage, harpoon in his hands….

A twilight, round hall, the walls built of screens, the seat looking like a throne…

This mirror doesn't break, pulls us inside itself – and throws out on the cold marble floor. No time to check the bones, I jump up raising the lash to strike.

But it looks like there's no obvious danger. The solid middle aged man is perched on the throne, dressed in something unbelievably luxurious and military type at the same time. His chest is covered with decorations. He doesn't seem to see us – all his attention is drawn towards the creature on the biggest screen. The creature looks like a huge red ant.

– We must join our efforts! – pontificates the man, – Together our races could…

I help Unfortunate to stand up. We fell into some game server, that's not bad.

– Humans have made their lying nature evident! – snaps the ant from the screen, – We will disperse the very memory of you like a dust in the wind!

The screen dims, the man presses his hands against his face and rocks from side to side.

– What is this? – asks Unfortunate.

– A game, – I explain looking around in a search for an exit. There is a door but it doesn't seem like it's possible to just open it. The room looks as a command bunker of some sort of a missile base, as it is shown in the movies. The austerity of the interior is only spoiled by a torn hole in the ceiling – some purple mist still flows down from it along with mirror splinters that fall from it and shatter into dust on the floor. "Warlock" still works, clung to several nearest servers.

– What is the game about?

– Star wars.

I pad to the man, the steps to the throne are made of crystal: it's very slippery and damned uncomfortable.

– Hey, human race savior! – I tap the player on the shoulder.

The man straightens on the throne, the miser man's tears well in his eyes.

– Deneb! – he orders. The screen flashes, the officer appears on it, the number of his decorations close to our player's. – Colonel! Move the squadron to the Sol's orbit!

– But Emperor, our planet is defenseless…

– The main thing is to retain the cradle of the human race! – speaks the Emperor abruptly.

The colonel nods, suffer on his face:

– Your order will be fulfilled, Emperor!

I block 'Emperor's' view with my hand. Maybe he doesn't see us? But the man pushes my hand aside and mumbles:

– Interference… communication unreliable…

Oh Gosh! Just see how did I find some work for myself suddenly… Deep-psychosis at its height. The man just doesn't WANT to see us – this wouldn't fit into stereotypes of the simple strategic

game he's so deep into.

– How to exit? – I shout, – Exit!

He outstretches his hand, pushes some button. He doesn't take us by consciousness, but unconsciously he's ready to do everything to get rid of 'interference'. His movements are limp and unsure: at least 24 hours in the Deep. The door rumbles behind my back, opening.

– What's the matter with him? – asks Unfortunate.

– Deep psychosis.

I turn back to the door, we must hurry: 'Warlock' must have left some traces, they will be detected sooner or later while the poor Emperor's timer is on most likely.

– Are we leaving? – asks Unfortunate.

Yes, I did break the Diver's Code when using weapon against Anatol and Dick but I'm diver anyway, the Deep's guardian. Who will do it if not me?

– Vika! – I command.

– Lenia? – the voice of Windows-Home is dull and muffled, the machine is overloaded and doesn't have any more strength for goodies.

– The standard set of gear.

Pause, a very long one – then the pockets start feeling heavy with load.

I rip off the remains of the overalls from me – was it tattered in the fall through mirrors? – and stay in the Gunslinger's costume, I wrap the lash carefully and it turns into a belt again.

– What are you gonna do? – Unfortunate is curiosity itself.

– Drag him out!

Now I need to intercept the comm channel that connects the player with his computer at home, then to break the security system, hardly it's too complicated – obviously the guy is a typical 'newbie'. Then I'll have to either run the exit deep-program or to just nullify the timer.

I take sunglasses from the left pocket and put them on, the darkness is almost complete, just one sparkling orange winding thread at the base of the throne can be seen. Here it is, his channel. I look around the room and see my own navel-string, scattered on the floor in rings and disappearing in the tunnel gnawed through by 'Warlock'. That's bad, it means we haven't connected to the player's server but entered from nobody knows where. My channel now may circle through the different continents, jump up through satellites, slide along fiber optics along the ocean floor… Too many spaces have we passed on our way from "Labyrinth"… and they are still near: I can see flashes of light in the tunnel, dimming pieces of threads fall from it from time to time.

And there's really no signal coming from Unfortunate, or there is but too well hidden for my simple scanner: just a dark silhouette watching me working.

There's a little metal box in my right pocket, I open it – a sparkling emerald beetle lies on the soft padding, moving his paws. I pick him up, he tries to break free aiming at my own channel. Oh no pal, not there…

I put the beetle at the throne base and step back. The beetle freezes for a moment quivering his head, then dives into the orange thread.

Now we'll wait and hope that there's only a standard antivirus set installed on the Emperor's computer.

– Who?

For a moment it seems to me that I hear Unfortunate's voice: just as smooth and unemotional, but when I turn around, it's four of us in the hall already… if to consider the 'Emperor' as a real events' participant. The glowing white thread is hanging from the tunnel, a long writhed figure on its end. Its contours are distorted, movements are jerky and erratic. The guy looks around but hardly can he see what's going on. Lord, from what distance have he fallen from, how could he survive the tunnel journey? Well done 'Warlock', nothing I can say…

– None of your business! – I growl as aggressively as I can. If the anonymous is just a common Net user he won't be able to hinder me. But the guest obviously doesn't like my reaction, he outstretches his hands and flexible glowing cord starts crawling towards me. Not to me to be exact but towards my channel.

Very funny. Nobody could make such situation on purpose – to drag I-don't-know– whom out, starting to rescue an idiot with deep-psychosis half-way, and on top of that all to bump into a hacker with a set of service programs.

At least good that his channel is extremely narrow, barely alive. I take and pull on 'gloves', grab the cord and tie it in a knot, then advise:

– Fuck off. I'm diver.

Usually this works instantly, but the guest either considers himself the coolest in the Deep or doesn't believe me.

– Whoever you are, even Papa Carlo! – he replies.

{ *Papa Carlo – the character that substituted Gepetto in Russian retelling of 'Pinocchio' done by Alexei Tolstoy. Mentioning Papa Carlo as a Very Important Person in a talk bears a stressed sarcasm.* } The second cord is faster and tries to squirm from my hands, small clips grow on its end. I catch the cord almost by my very channel and squeeze it with pleasure. The 'gloves' knock the program down without a hitch. I

wish I could do the same with the 'guest', but the gloves won't work here and I'm too reluctant to use 'Warlock': it works way too powerfully, I even didn't expect such an effect. Also Unfortunate circles around the hacker, having lost all interest in me. The former doesn't notice him, obviously looking through the scanner too, seeing the comm channels only.

– Look, what do you want? – I ask, adjusting to the guest's vocabulary,

– I'm working!

– Me too.

The wooden voice of the guest irritates but it's a miracle that I can hear anything at all: his channel's thread is thinned to its limit, the figure starts quivering, the head rolls at its side, the nose slides on his cheek but the hands become longer for that. The view is amusing and my anger disappears.

– Listen you freak… I'll have to drag you out too some day! Get off, the 'newbie' might croak!

Finally he understands that it's serious, he stops pursuing my channel but gets something like a flashlight instead and casts a beam on the 'Emperor'. Some semi-active scanning program. Let him watch, there's nothing secret in my methods.

– The customer's system under control. – whispers Windows-Home.

It's impossible to tell beforehand how will the insides of the other computer look like if one looks from the Deep, so I prefer the simplest way. I nudge the 'newbie' – he rolls down from the 'throne', sits on the floor clumsily. I take his place, take 'gloves' off and grab the orange thread with bare hands, pulling it.

– Vika, terminal!

The screen unwraps before me. A-ha… "Virt-navigator", a nice operating system but the one intended for somebody with an instinct of self-preservation, not for the 'newbie'– experimentator. It's a penny deal to turn off the timer on it.

And so this loser ruler of the galaxy did… he have already spent 28 hours in virtuality!

I'm too lazy to mingle with the timer, so I just find the urgent Deep exit file and run it. Deep program doesn't submit at once, asks for confirmation. And they call it 'urgent exit'…

The "Emperor" moans quietly and grabs his head, tries to walk towards the door. I jump from the throne, wrapping up the terminal with a wave of my hand, grab the man by the collar and push him towards the throne, ordering:

– Take the helmet off! Shut down the machine!

– I… I didn't mean to… – mumbles the 'emperor'.

– I'll mail you the bill for your rescue, – I cut him off, – exit, now!

The man's hands jerk to his head, then hammer the air erratically, his figure dims, the orange thread disappears. I take the glasses off.

The hacker under the tunnel opening is almost ghostly already, he rotates his head slowly looking around. That's how the legends of miracle making divers are born.

– Let's go, – I say to Unfortunate who still circles around the hacker, looking up into the tunnel opening, from where various garbage still pours in. – Come on!

I have to drag him away by hand, like a kid. The hacker stays in the empty hall, he's still full of curiosity. The hole in the ceiling narrows slowly and his channel will be broken in around ten minutes. Ah well, let him sort his own problems out by himself – if he's so damned cool…

The door leads us out into a small hall with seven more similar doors and an elevator shaft. Somewhere nearby the leader of red ants dreams on his throne, the wily plans are plotted by the ruler of intelligent medusas and by other game addicts…

– Why did you glue yourself to that hacker? – I ask Unfortunate in elevator but he doesn't answer.

Let him, the most important thing is that I've finally got him out of "Labyrinth", just from under the nose of two mighty corporations!

Elevator brings us to Deeptown's street, I look around. There's the AOL tower, long rows of hotels, the green of the park – this is "Giltoniel's Gardens". A-ha, not too bad: we are on the border Russian, European and American sectors of the city. Unfortunate raises his head and pronounces:

-‡">С§¤Л Ё Ц« ҐВЛ: •Я§ПЁ ‘ЁАЁГБ !

I follow his look: the colorful neon sign is glowing above the building that we've just left: "Stars & Planets: Master of Sirius". { *Engl. In the original* } A famous company, it's worthy to offer them diver services – the work is easy but earnings are stable.

– Unfortunate, what language is native for you?

– You don't know it, – he waves his hand.

I make a guess:

– Basic maybe?

We both laugh.

– Okay, – I agree, – You're alive, you're not a product of computer intelligence.

– Thanks.

– But who are you?

Unfortunate shrugs and studies passers by with curiosity of somebody who entered virtuality for the first time.

– Take the mask off, – I advise and pull respirator from him

myself, – No need to scare the people.

– Will we go anywhere else? – asks Unfortunate.

To be honest, I have no idea myself. I was fearing a quick and energetic pursuit which we'll need to flee with much noise and blood. Then we would rush to "Amusements" immediately.

– Let's walk a little, – I decide. – Have you ever been to the Elvish Gardens?

– No.

– Let's go then. Not that it's a super attraction, but…. – I start talking, but it looks like it isn't my fate to be a guide today.

The bright rainbow flashes up in the evening sky dimming the stars, the crystal ringing is heard: a symbol of the Net-wide broadcast. It was used for only 5 or 6 times on my memory.

And I can guess what they will convey now.

– Taxi! – I scream, stretching my hand. A car stops by in an instant, I push Unfortunate inside and get in myself. The driver – a young curly-haired black girl – turns to us with a smile.

I don't have a revolver with me now, so I just pull the gloves on and knock the girl out with a fist. Unfortunate doesn't protest, he can correctly tell real people from programs.

– To the brothel "Any Amusements"! – I order and the girl submits.

The car jumps forward.

– Citizens of Deeptown!

The voice is coming from everywhere, nobody can hide from it in a cozy car interior or behind the walls of the house.

– This is Jordan Reid addressing you, the city's Security Service commissar…

I know Reid, he's a nice guy even if an American, one of those who is ready to communicate with divers and to tolerate minor offences for the sake of the whole Net's well being.

– An important message is being broadcasted… please pay attention…

– mumbles the girl.

But I'm attention itself already.

– A crime was committed on the territory of "Labyrinth of Death" around half an hour ago, a crime that is threatening the very existence of Deeptown itself. – says Reid.

Mother of God! What is that?

– Two persons, one of them is a diver, are charged of using a virus weapon of a type forbidden by the Moscow Convention. It is a polymorphic virus with labeled 'Warlock-9000', with unlimited ability for spreading.

What's this bull? Never would Maniac make such a virus!

– One of the virus' characteristics is interception of control over communication hardware. Al-Kabar Corporation and "Labyrinth of Death" are among the victims.

Now it becomes clear to me. When the fighting rivals understood that their prey had escaped, they united and charged me of everything, including destruction of the 33rd level.

Great. Now just try to prove that 'Warlock' have only drilled a hole for us and then died peacefully as any decent legalized virus should. Even if to surrender the source code to the police, nobody would take a risk to acquit me. Who knows how could 'Warlock' interfere with "Labyrinth"'s virtual space?

– Shit, – I whisper.

– Is it bad? – asks Unfortunate.

– Much worse.

I pull my hand over the girl's shoulder, grab a phone from the dashboard and dial Guillermo's number.

– Now you can see the appearance that was used by suspects in "Labyrinth", – informs Jordan, – We offer these individuals to arrive to Deeptown Security Department voluntarily. I would also request anybody who knows these individuals to contact me.

Our portraits flash up in the sky, then me and Unfortunate are demonstrated full height and in motion.

Looks impressive, especially when I cut off Dick's head with the lash.

– Assholes, – I mumble ungluing myself from the window.

Connection establishes in around 10 seconds.

– Hello! { *in Engl* }

– Hi Willy, – I say quickly, – How should I understand that?

A pause.

– Ah! Gunslinger? Where are you?

– In a car.

I don't risk, the knocked off transportation program doesn't report its location.

– A misunderstanding have happened, – says Guillermo quickly, – Come here, we'll fix everything.

– Drop your charges first.

Willy sighs:

– Gunslinger, this is not in my… aaa… powers.

– Too bad. I'll call you later. – I promise and put the phone back.

We approach the brothel and a new problem arises – what to do with a car? It's not the easiest task to destroy the program completely. If I let it go – Deep Transit would restore control over it sooner or later and will figure out our route.

I'll have to get help from Deep-Transit itself…

I take a box with an emerald beetle from my pocket, put the glasses on, then command:

– Unfortunate, get out.

I exit the car after him, throw the dumb insect inside and shut the door. The result follows immediately.

Deep-Transit doesn't guard its cars too well preferring to tolerate small pranks like my free and undocumented rides, but they mercilessly crush any attempts to penetrate into their servers. It's impossible to defeat their security with primitive programs such as the beetle.

The cab dims and dissolves in the air – the comm channel was chopped off at the very first attempt of the beetle to crawl into the foreign computer.

– Let's go, – I poke Unfortunate slightly and grab his hand. If there are any customers in the lobby now – we're in deep trouble. But we are lucky

– it's nobody there, even the guard is missing.

– This is brothel, – I inform Unfortunate just in case, – You can browse the albums.

He shakes his head.

– Why I'm not surprised? Follow me…

We almost run along the corridor. I expect employees to look from behind the doors again but it's absolutely silent. Nobody around at all! As if the brothel died.

I push the door into Vika's room prepared for that she'll not be there either. Unfortunate hesitates behind my back.

– May I congratulate you Leonid? – asks Vika in an icy voice.

It's so clean in the hut as if no earthquake had ever happened. I don't know about others but I usually make such a cleaning being in the lousiest mood only. A little boombox have appeared on the table, Vika have changed, now she's dressed in gray jeans and a jersey of the same color.

And also, she expects my explanations if to judge from her tone.

– You have heard the commissar?

– Who haven't? – Vika rises and I pad back hurriedly. When the woman is mad, the man better not to resist. – So you've saved your… friend. Have he saved you guy?

Unfortunate shrugs smiling, and Vika slows down a little.

– What is your name?

– Unfortunate.

– Um-hm. So listen here pal, don't take your chances, just stay by the window and be silent!

Unfortunate submits and Vika moves towards me. Oh, the wrong personality have she chosen for that – it's Madam's manner.

– So, you've saved… So you've fucked Al-Kabar and "Labyrinth"…

– Vika, they're lying! – I say hurriedly, – 'Warlock-9000' is a local virus, it conforms to Convention's standards!

– And do they lie about the diver too? – shouts Vika, and I finally understand what exactly did piss her off, – Do they? Or somebody else is lying?… somebody else!

I don't have a big experience in getting slaps in the face, I hold the aching cheek and stand still as a pole. Unfortunate obediently looks into the window but obviously he could hear the sound well.

– Diver? – Vika is still boiling, – Diver? And I was so damned stupid to offer you help! Couldn't you tell me that you're diver yourself?

– No, – I whisper.

– Why? You don't trust me?

I'd never believe that God created a woman from Adam's rib. Never, as well as in that the man was created from clay, but of the different sort.

The reasons we find for becoming mad are too different.

– I thought I could lose you.

– And so you… – starts Vika and silences.

– It's impossible to love somebody who sees the Deep without illusions. I know Vika, I tried to uncover before. It… always happens. You would start to hate me. Imperceptibly. You wouldn't even notice what had happened…

I keep talking, already knowing that it's over. We might stay friends but nothing more. No woman in the world would love somebody who sees her face as a mesh of color pixels.

– Yes, I had to tell you, – I whisper, – Immediately. I'm sorry, I couldn't. Would you ever have a nerve to confess that you're diver?

Vika stays silent, there are tears in her eyes that don't really exist. There's a wall between us, from now on and forever.

– No, – she says quietly, – I couldn't either. I… didn't want to lose you.

I think I went crazy.

So what if I hug her tightly and there's no wall between us?

– My work… it's because of it. It's too disgusting when everything is for real. I don't know how it happened… it was too dirty… I was scared and had fallen from the Deep…

– We say – surfaced…

– Surfaced…

Unfortunate looks at the mountains, he's a great guy, he can strand like this all day.

– I always surface. That's why I always take the worst freaks, because I don't care…

I have a question that I'll never ask but Vika answers herself:

– There, by the river I didn't exit… for the first time in my life. Honest.

I believe her as all men from the beginning of times do.

Only our faith becomes the truth in this world.

111

Vika makes coffee and even Unfortunate cheers up a little. We sit down around the table, fresh cream is in the small pitcher, a pile of white sugar is in the sugar bowl, the full bottle of Ahtamar waits for its turn. Though, Vika pours the cognac into cups immediately.

– For your success, Lenia, – she says.

– Such successes are cheap, – I reply.

– Why?

– Net-wide search.

– So what?

– I'll have to leave. This personality is exposed and Gunslinger was seen here.

– By whom? – Vika says as if she doesn't understand all complexity of the situation. – By my girls?

– By them too.

– They won't tell anybody. Or do you think that virtual prostitutes are loyal to the powers of this world? You know, we had seen them all without pants… corporations' directors and companies' presidents. The people who usually lash the woman before going to bed don't evoke any pity.

– According to you they are all perverts.

– Sure not, – Vika smiles, – But these are the guests that are remembered. None of our girls would squeal on Gunslinger. All the more that you never made orgies and weren't disgusted to sit with us.

– Are you sure?

– Lenia, all our personnel is from Russia, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Kazakhstan. What do you think, does the love towards the government or big business exist there?

– I've never noticed such perversions.

– That's my point. For your success!

We drink cognac, Unfortunate joins us. His face is emotionless as if he have sipped some tea.

– What about Cap? – I remember – This is the one who remembers me for sure!

– Not that breed. Well defined asocial type… he won't squeal on you.

– He seemed capable of much to me.

Vika drums her fingers against the table.

– Lenia… Cap always takes the red album. This is a special group, where everything is allowed. Not just chains, lashes and petty sadist's delights, but any atrocities. Murders, body dismemberment… should I go on?

– Thanks, that's enough.

– So, Cap never does anything of this. He comes to us to socialize… to talk.

– And that's how he pissed everybody off?

– Lenia, when the solid unkie orders the red album, brings the girl to the dungeon and rips out her throat screaming "I'm a vampire!", this is lousy, disgusting but understandable. It's just an illness. When a plain looking youth sits across the girl and starts a 'sincere talk' with her… when he spends money to prove her in a couple of hours that she is a slut and a dirty beast, that she doesn't deserve to live on Earth… this is much more terrible, believe me.

– Why? – Unfortunate enters the talk suddenly.

– Because it's a curse. The right to judge and the right to rule. The right for the Truth. It's easy to sort it out with a stupid person or a beast. It's much more difficult with somebody who considers himself superhuman, a clean, clever and pure one. Generals fighting for peace, rulers destroying corruption, perverts condemning pornography – oh Lord, haven't we seen enough of them? Maybe this is a kind of curse that overhangs above the mankind? When they promise order one should expect chaos, when they defend life – death comes, when they defend moral – people turn into animals. You just have to say – I'm above that, I'm cleaner, I'm better – and requital comes immediately. Only those who don't climb the pedestal and never promise any miracles do bring good into the world.

I can feel that they have become engaged seriously and meddle quickly:

– Stop! Vika, let's do without disputes about good and evil! In such a way it's possible to declare killers and thieves justs!

– You're a thief yourself, – notes Vika.

– I help to distribute information.

– And the pickpocket teaches the people vigilance. But does the single mother with many children whose purse with a whole salary was stolen need such a lesson?

I have millions of objections. I can try to explain that stealing somebody else's files is not the most important in diver's work. Hacker can be much more successful in that without even entering virtuality, and there's a big difference between stealing the data and copying it: I never leave empty computers behind. What the hell is the difference for the mankind who will be the first in producing new shampoo or cold reliever?

But I don't want to argue with Vika.

– I'm sorry, – she touches my hand, – I'm wrong.

– Why not? You kicked my butt well…

– I'm sorry… You see Unfortunate, we have fallen in the world of

pure information, the world of complete licence. One can fight, lead a dissolute life, engage in hooliganism. There's no laws ready, and most important – the human mentality isn't ready. There's almost no punishments in the Deep – even if they excommunicate you from the Net, it's possible to reenter under the different name. One can get into troubles stealing data, but even here restraining norms are minimal. Go ahead and try to prove to the jury that it was Mr John Smith who stole a new game from Microprose's server, smuggled it to Vanya Petrov who released it to the market in a pirate manner with the help of Van Xo. It's a world of unprovable crimes and fake deaths. Only the pain in the soul remains real – but who would ever measure this pain that slid across the wires and squeezed your heart? We have nothing left except the moral, the funny shabby moral. And we realized that it's so much more comfortable to be a scum or a saint than a human… just a human, a real human.

– But what is that – a human? – says Unfortunate, – Just a human, a real human?

– I'd explain you, – I reply, – If I was God. Cut this out you two, okay?

– But I'm really curious, – Unfortunate still talks in a quiet, even somehow indifferent tone but there's a spark of excitement in his eyes.

– You're the human.

– Why?

Really, why? Wasn't I ready to consider him nothing more than just a cunning program? I feel confused but Vika also looks at me waiting for an answer and I say:

– I don't know. You didn't shoot people in "Labyrinth", you rescued nonexistent kid… But this is an extreme stupidity… You cite Carroll in original but the human is not just a crammed load of knowledge… You're in the Deep for the third day in a row and you're still fine…

Vika looks at Unfortunate in surprise.

– And nobody knows how did you enter virtuality… but this is not a human indication but the opposite…

He waits patiently.

– You know, this is something inside us, – I say suddenly even for myself. – You're a human for me… because I'd like to be your friend.

It seems that Unfortunate is confused.

– We're all wearing masks here in the Deep, maybe it's for the better, maybe it's closer to the truth. I don't know. When you exit into the real world, you might turn out to be a very unpleasant type. But here and now I consider you human. It's impossible to explain.

– Then maybe it's for good that I can't exit into reality? – asks Unfortunate. He looks at Vika and smiles shyly, – The thing is, I'm not

a human.

Here we go again.

Insanity, part two.

Vika smiles examining Unfortunate, and my heart sinks.

– Vika… he doesn't lie. He never lies. – I say slowly standing up – When he doesn't want to reply, he just says nothing… – I take her hand and pull her from the table. Unfortunate watches us, sadly and calmly.

– Was it a joke? – Vika nods to Unfortunate questionably.

– No.

– He can't joke, – I confirm. – You really can't exit the Deep?

– No.

– Are you a human?

– No.

– Who are you?

Silence.

– You see? – I almost shout, – He doesn't reply!

– A minute ago you called me a human, – says Unfortunate, – You even said that you'd like to be my friend. Was it true?

Now it's my turn to be silent.

– You said that the truth is here and now, – he goes on, – Anyone may be himself in the Deep, without any makeup. Only the soul… if to believe in it.

– Yes! – I say, – Yes, it was true!

– Then what scares you? My confession?

I nod. Vika snuggles close and I can feel how she shakes. I didn't expect her to be so scared.

– Why didn't you tell before? – I shout.

– I told you enough, Leonid.

At this point Vika starts to laugh excitedly.

– You're crazy, both of you! You're not human? – she breaks free, approaches Unfortunate, takes his hand, – Tell me!

– What do you define by the term 'human'?

– A bipedal creature without feathers!

– I'm NOT a human.

The nightmare goes on. Unfortunate plays his games, Vika is confused and I don't know anymore how to break the chain of riddles and omissions. Computer mind is impossible! It's not time yet for it to be born. But I can't consider Unfortunate's words a lie either!

The phone ring that tears the silence is like a salvation.

Vika steps back from Unfortunate, opens the door of the sideboard. A cordless phone lies there among scattered jars, packages and boxes.

– Yes? – says Vika without averting her gaze from Unfortunate.

The voice in the handset is loud and confident, I can hear it well and recognize it immediately.

– I'd like to talk to Gunslinger.

– Whom? – Vika is genuinely surprised.

– Gunslinger. Tell him that Man Without Face wants to talk to him.

I step forward and take the phone.

– Talk.

– Firstly, I'd like to congratulate you Gunslinger. Secondly, I suggest you to come out.

– No fucking way. – I reply.

– Gunslinger, we have no time for games. I'm standing by the main entrance. But this time I outstrip our competitors for a couple of minutes only, no more. Al-Kabar could trace your route. Come out.

– And what's next?

– You will get the promised reward and I will get Unfortunate.

A loud phone, a very loud one. I look at the blonde guy who doesn't consider himself a human, at frowning Vika.

– I think he doesn't want to go with you, – I reply, – I'm sorry.

– Gunslinger, we had a deal…

– I didn't promise to give you the guy. I've got him out of "Labyrinth" and all the rest is our own business.

– You take too much responsibility on yourself, diver.

– At least somebody must make decisions, right?

– Well, you've made yours.

The voice vanishes. In a second the floor quivers, pushing us to the ceiling, the log walls crunch, bending. A picture with a waterfall on it falls on me and the sound of water returns me to my senses.

I rise and crawl along the kicking floor. This is not an earthquake, this is the brothel's walls falling apart, they break the security system so naively praised by Computer Wiz.

Though, if nobody broke into the hut yet, it means that the security wasn't too bad after all.

– Vika!

I help her to stand up, her face is in blood, the jersey sleeve torn off.

– Bastards, – she whispers.

Only Unfortunate haven't fallen down, he stands propped against the wall, outstretching his hands to the sides to keep balance.

– I'll come out of the bui… – he starts, but the next explosion booms and muffles his words, – It's inevitable…

– Do you want to surrender?

– No, but…

– Then stop fluttering! – I shake Vika slightly, – Are there any

ropes in the room?

She shakes her head in confusion.

– We need ropes!

Vika turns to look at the window, she understood.

– We could jump…

– We'll kill ourselves, there's seven and a half meters to go!

Fortunately Vika doesn't notice the exactness of the figure, otherwise I wouldn't avoid a untimely scandal. Women are made of a different clay.

– On the third floor… – she starts, and then the door flies open. I tear the belt from my body and it turns into lash with a soft hiss. But there's neither Man Without face nor his mercenaries in the door, Computer Wiz hangs there balancing on his winged slippers. The corridor behind his back is enveloped in colorful glow, flashes and as I look at this carnival blur, something starts happening to me – my movements slow down, lose their precision…

– Wow, 'Warlock Nine-thousandth'! – screams the Wiz cheerfully seeing the lash in my hand, flows into the room, shuts the door and my sudden fatigue disappears. – Vika, where's Madam?

– I'm for her!

– Brothello is under attack! – Wiz is still having fun – The first floor was freakin' swept out to hell! The braker is on but they move anyway!

He flies to me, grabs my sleeve and asks excitedly:

– Saw this illumination? So much junk info is flowing to their modems, any computer would choke! Well, except the good one… Vika, so where's Madam?

– Can we hold out against this?

– No, sure not! Cool profies are working! But never mind, everything is being logged, we'll file such a protest – don't worry… Where's Madam, I won't start active systems without her order!

Vika's body flickers, she broadens in her chest and hips, the face melts like wax. So that's how looks the diver from the side when exiting virtuality and changing body.

– Fire up everything you have, – orders Madam.

– Oh! Ah! – Wiz thrusts his eyes open in theatrical surprise. Can he ever stop playing I wonder? – I knew, I knew that!

His hands are busy not with a show though, he gets a small console from his pocket and starts typing in some commands.

– We won't hold out anyway, Madam Vika!

– We must get out, Wiz.

– Madam! – Wiz presses his hands against his heart, – I can't help with that so quickly, the diver is necessary here!

– It doesn't anything to do with divers, – I wave my hand towards

the window, – The rope is necessary!

– To hang yourselves up? – laughs Wiz. He crosses his legs, falls on the floor and starts pulling off his slippers not stopping to chatter – Geez how funny, that weirdo on the third floor, you know, the one who likes sex for three, he never tells anything about himself, was so scared that jumped out of the window! He fell into the pool and now splashes there screaming that he can't swim and he's the State Duma deputy and we must save him…

He throws me the slippers.

– Take these, the power is unlimited, you'll descend all three! Madam, why didn't you ever tell that Vika is your mask, I'm not tattler, I wouldn't tell anybody!

I pull the slippers on, the wings quiver excitedly and thresh against my fingers. Funny: Madam is Vika's mask for Wiz, for me it's vice versa.

– Oh, what a load of scandals will we have now… And who are you man, huh?

Unfortunate doesn't reply, maybe he feels dizzy too, just as me? Computer Wiz looks like a multitasking operating system which is simultaneously busy both with buffoonery and a serious work. I can't do that.

– Thanks, – I say trying to stand up. Wiz nudges me under my elbow and holds while I'm balancing in the air getting used to it. The feeling is absolutely weird, this is not a jet knapsack which is used on some "Labyrinth"'s levels, but a real walking on air.

– Just like on stairs, – whispers Wiz, – Like ascending-descending stairways.

– Wiz, how much more time do we have? – Madam looks around the hut business-like, hangs Vika's purse on her shoulder, then starts pulling jars and packages from the sideboard and throwing them out of the window with a basketball player's moves. I doubt we'll have time to pick all this stuff up but I don't argue.

– Just for a little parting kiss!

– Then let's postpone it until our next meeting. Please Wiz, try to hold them as long as you can… Chatter with them or something…

– I'll try… – confuses Wiz suddenly, – Well… I don't know how…

– Vika, return into your body, – I ask examining Madam's mighty dimensions, then approach Unfortunate who still clings to the wall.

– Man, I don't care who you are, a human or a program. I tend to agree with both!

He looks into my eyes silently.

– I don't want to give you to those freaks. I'll try to rescue you. Do you believe me?

Unfortunate stays silent.

– I still want to be your friend, – I say, – Whoever you might be.

He makes a step towards me, I add:

– Please… Let's not give those bastards a pleasure to get us!

I think I've said something wrong.

– Good – regardless of the evil? – inquires Unfortunate.

– How else? – Wiz enters the talk suddenly. He have plopped into the armchair, crossed his legs and became suddenly serious, – If there's no any starting point – everything becomes senseless.

Unfortunate silences and obediently pads to the window with us. Vika – not Madam, but Vika – have already climbed the window-sill and looks down with a strange expression.

– You what, fear heights? – I ask a bit too late.

– Come on, don't lose the time, huh! – shouts Wiz behind us. I turn back to look at him – his fingers are threshing against the console while the roaring starts behind the door as if of the Boeing on the runway. Somebody's scream is almost muffled by the roaring. Flames scurry along the wooden door.

– Wiz, what about you?

Computer Wiz smiles and takes something from his pocket that looks most like a chicken egg.

– I have this.

– What's that?

– You'll see. – promises the Wiz.

Vika and Unfortunate hang on my shoulders so simultaneously that no other command is required. I step over the window-sill and place my foot on the air. The air holds.

The wind hits me on the side, the river noises some 100 meters below, I start feeling dizzy. I must exit, exit the Deep.

But I just… don't want to see Vika's face as a colorful pixel mesh.

Initially I was going to descend onto the slope but now I see it won't make sense: the path is blocked with boulders… damned earthquake! I go forward and down, above the slope, the canyon, the roaring mountain river – to the opposite slope, covered with green thickets.

– I even fear to fly planes… – whispers Vika. I avert my look from the chasm below and look at her.

– Hold on, baby…

– Have you… surfaced?

– No!

She shuts her eyes for a second, then raises her head:

– Lenia, exit! Don't torture yourself!

Yeah, right… keep waiting.

I'm of a different clay.

– Take care guys! – shouts Wiz behind. He must have leaned out

of the window.

– 'Guys'! – whispers Vika with indignation, – All you males are same!

– Vickie, and a thousand and a half kisses for you! – goes on Wiz.

I'm glad now that he's so talkative. I still have a hundred meters ahead to cover.

I look to the left – Unfortunate's face is absolutely calm, he looks down in the chasm below with a joyful childlike curiosity. That's whom I had to let to put the slippers on.

I have no idea why did Vika be so modest praising Siegsgord, her space is not any worse, maybe even more real.

The pine tree branches sweep me across the face, the violet colored cone flows past my eyes. As strange as it might seem, I now believe that those exist.

I'm spiraling around the pine tree descending lower and lower. The cliff with a small hut perched on it was left on the opposite side of the canyon, Wiz is not in the window anymore.

– Lenia.. – whispers Vika when it's still a meter and a half left to the ground and unclenches her hands. Shouldn't have done that: she lands fine while me and Unfortunate are in a worse position, I tumble down to my left side, the slippers beat the air convulsively, unable to hold us.

A small pile.

Isn't it too many falls for one day, especially in the Chinese suit with its weak limitations for hit strength?

I shake off the slippers that hang in the air before me and stand up gulping for air greedily and rubbing the bruised side. Unfortunate moans and squats.

Vika looks at us with confusion.

– Was it painful, guys?

– No, everything is just great! – I growl helping Unfortunate to stand up. The dense green canopy is above and the slope in some five meters away. The water rumble muffles the rustling of needles under the feet. It's so good to be on the solid ground again!

– Lenia…

– Passed that, – I cut off. I can understand what is a height fright after all, couldn't pass Al-Kabar's bridge in the Deep myself. We're out of the brothel, and this is the most important thing. We're not in the space attacked by Man Without Face's people. The mountains created by Vika for her 'own consumption' surround us, the mountains where never was a single human. The space within a space, a secret world that lives according to its own laws, and the hut on the slope is the only door into it…

The thick orange-black fire strikes from the hut's window, the log

walls instantly start burning in a hot quick fire. Wiz said we'll see, and he was right, it's difficult not to notice how the file bomb works. The only exit into the normal Deep is burning before us.

– I hope you're there… Man Without Face, – I say.

– What did he promise you for Unfortunate? – asks Vika.

I squint my eyes at the failed trade subject and confess, – The Medal of Complete Licence.

– What?

– You what, have never heard about it? It's the one Dibenko got for the creation of the Deep, the right for any actions in the virtual world.

Vika smiles.

– It's more than money, – I say, – an absolution of any sins…

– They swindled you, Lenia.

– Why?

– Lenia, the Medal of Complete License is unique only because it exists in one single copy. Any other created copy is considered a fake automatically and is destroyed. I know that, I… knew a guy who tried to make a copy.

The funniest thing is that I'm not surprised for even a little bit. I wink to Unfortunate and say:

– You really must be a very important guy… if even Dimka Dibenko is ready to sacrifice his main treasure for your hide…

Unfortunate shakes his head:

– No, I'm even more important.

Part 4. The Deep

0

From the food thrown by Vika through the window, only the glass jar of jam and the paper pack of crackers have survived, as if in mockery of the physics laws. The rest of the stuff slipped in the gap or was broken against the boulders. In my opinion, it made no sense to store any food but we picked up the jar anyway.

Maybe it's an inertia of consciousness, the panicked greed of mind that sees wild nature around.

– Do you have any plan? – I ask Vika.

– Why me? It was your idea to flee through the window, – she objects reasonably.

– We didn't have choice.

– We did. You're diver after all.

I nod at Unfortunate.

– And who is he?

Vika have grown tired of this question during a single last hour. We sit down on a soft grass, in the tree shade. A white smoke still whirls above the remains of the hut.

We silently watch Unfortunate who wanders over the slope, touches pine trees, picks up some needles and pebbles from the ground. The city dweller who have found himself in the wild for the first time, an If castle dungeons' prisoner who was able to escape.

– Leonid, I must have been speaking too emotionally about computer mind… – starts Vika, – So – he is a human. An ordinary human who takes you in.

– He is in the Deep for three days.

– Stimulants, or he's a diver too.

– His comm channel can't be traced.

– A well hidden one.

– Two big companies and Dibenko are after him.

– It's enough stupid people in the world.

Okkam's blade is a wonderful thing, it cuts all mystic off clean, together with meat.

– Vika, you're psychologist… are there any tests for telling people?

She laughs quietly.

– Sure not. These were never needed yet.

– I've seen a method to check in some sci-fi book…

– Do you really think that some scheme invented by a writer while drinking a cup of coffee would work?

– We should try at least, – I'm holding my ground, – There are institutes that study artificial intelligence problems after all. They

must have something worked out. There are fans who invent abstract tests… for the future. I'll exit the Deep and will browse the Internet a little.

– And how are you going to return? There's no entrance into this space anymore. – Vika laughs bitterly, – I think it's lost at all, forever. A closed system, it will live in the computer by itself.

– A good hacker will be able to break a passage.

– It would be a different world then. The mountains will resist until the end, if somebody breaks in here, they'll lose their freedom.

I understand her very well but I hate such a prudent pessimism.

– You'll draw the new ones.

Vika doesn't feel hurt.

– Next time I'll draw the sea. The sea, the sky and islands.

– … And don't forget an emergency exit.

– Spaces live according to their own laws… – Vika stands up. – There might be an exit, Lenia. When these mountains were built, the program was searching for other landscapes, on all open servers. It was stealing pieces from there… – she smiles in confusion, – And it had left some loopholes, a tiny ones. If we manage to find one of those, we'll be able to exit.

– This sounds better already.

As a very last resort I have 'Warlock', but it's too risky to use it: the enemies would notice the trace of the virus.

– We must get out of here, – decides Vika, – We have 5 more hours until the dusk. If the attackers manage to restore the hut, it'd be better to be as far from it as possible.

1

We stop only when the sun disappears in the paling of the mountains and the orange sheen in the clouds fades. We managed to walk some 10 kilometers, and this is much, very much. As for the night – only suicidal people wander in the mountains at night.

The last quarter hour we spend gathering brushwood. Fortunately, it's plenty of it around, we're on the border between the forest and the Alpine meadows. Together with Unfortunate we drag in the small pine tree fallen of the wind and I tear the small branches from it, scratching my hands, then arrange them in a cone pile.

– That's enough, boys, – decides Vika. She lights a cigarette and makes a fire quickly and with experience.

The supper is very symbolical – raspberry jam and dry crackers. Unfortunate doesn't care at all: he chews with an appetite of electrical mincer. I can't down a single piece, I wish I could have a big chunk of fried meat with hot sauce and green peas, with a couple of bottles of cold beer. And all this is so close! One just have to exit the Deep, reenter, come to "Old Hacker" or "Three Piglets"…

Me and Vika glance at each other without an agreement.

I'm not sure whether she dreams of pork with beer or of trout with white wine, but not of a cookies with jam for sure.

– Tastes good, Unfortunate? – inquires Vika.

– Um-hm.

– What do you eat usually?

– Nasty things…

Her patience ends instantly.

– Now hon, listen to me…

Unfortunate pulls his hand back from crackers and looks at Vika questionably. We are on one side from the fire, he's on the other. Opposition.

– We've got a problem, – starts Vika, – And this problem is you. Maybe you don't understand the situation we have now completely… well, I'll try to define it then. Correct me please if I make any mistake, okay?

Unfortunate nods. When you press somebody, it's very important to give him an opportunity to object… or at least to pretend to.

– You were in "Labyrinth" and couldn't exit by yourself, right? Leonid have spent tons of time and money to save you and he did that, right?

Not quite – "Labyrinth" paid for my work initially… but I stay silent and Unfortunate nods obediently.

– Lenia rescued you and brought you to my place. A reward was

awaiting him, a very big one if he would hand you over but he didn't do that. As a result, he's wanted as a criminal, he's searched for across all the Net. Right? Then my Institution was ruined completely in an attempt to seize you. It's not that difficult to restore the programs but "Amusements"' reputation is lost forever. Now I'll have to start everything from scratch.

– I'm really sorry… – says Unfortunate quietly, – I…. I didn't mean to bring so many troubles for you.

– Wait. We're still on the run. If you haven't got that already, I'll explain to you: there's no ordinary way to exit this space. Exits might exist but nobody knows whether we'll be able to find them in foreseeable future or not. Me and Lenia are divers, we can leave this place at any moment but we won't be able to return here, ever, and you'll stay alone here. Maybe forever. That's the situation we have… from moral and ethical point of view.

– I'm so sorry, – repeats Unfortunate.

– Let's talk about you now? It is you who is the reason for everything that have happened after all.

Unfortunate shrinks but stays silent.

– You're either human or a creature of the machine mind. The latter is doubtful though. If you're human, then you obviously can enter and exit the Deep by yourself. Like divers, or even cooler. Right? Otherwise you wouldn't look so fresh during your fourth day in virtuality. Would you like to argue with that?

Silence.

– Come on man, I certainly assume such possibility, – says Vika, – After all, a kilo and a half of brains is much bigger mystery than a gram of silicon in a chip. I can imagine someone who managed to enter virtuality without helmets, modems, deep program… And I even imagine his joy… and some shock from this event. Why not to play the fool a little, why not to envelope himself in a mystery? Everything is quite explainable. But try to understand, it's not a joke anymore – you make us suffer, you make the conflict harder and harder to resolve with each minute. Try to understand, we can't tinker with you forever!

– I… I'm tired… just tired… – Unfortunate looks at me as if seeking support.

No way.

– And the last thing – how we can resolve this situation, – enunciates Vika, – It's ridiculous to proceed this way, lead-time of the conflict wouldn't do us any good. If you don't want to uncover yourself or don't trust us or don't want to spoil such a beautiful legend – just tell us and we'll leave. Then the newbies will tell tales of The One Lost In The Deep… If you consider us trustworthy, explain who

you are and why you started all this. You have two ways out, it's not that little.

She falls silent and I take and shake her hand gently. I never have enough cool to lead the situation to such clarity, to the 'either-or' state.

– I… – Unfortunate stops and looks at the fire. Brushwood scratches softly, sparks jump into the dark sky, – It's my fault. I'm tired, tired of silence… I shouldn't have done that…

– What are you talking about? – asks Vika, maybe in a bit too sharp tone. But Unfortunate is confused and demoralized now.

– Too quiet, – he mumbles, – It's impossible to comprehend beforehand, never. All sounds became dead, all colors faded. Seconds – like centuries. Billions of centuries. I was warned but I didn't want to believe.

He swallows some air and stretches his hand towards the fire. The flame touches his fingers.

– Neither pain nor joy, nothing. A Great Silence. Everywhere. Eternal Void. And the Void doesn't have any borders… I couldn't resist.

His hand pats the flame tenderly.

– I can't explain you anything. Leave.

I glance at Vika – now she'll get him… but there's only a reflection of fire in her eyes, black night and red flames. The Silence Unfortunate was talking about have touched her too, just as me last time.

I rise and pull Unfortunate from the fire. Auto-suggestion is a powerful thing: having burned in virtuality one can expect real blisters. I make him to squat by the stream and put his hand into cold water.

– Alrite, – I decide. – We'll sleep now. Just sleep instead of taking each other in. Me and Vika will surface keeping connection, we need to eat normally. As for you… do whatever. In the morning you'll decide what you want after all.

Unfortunate silently splashes his hand in cold water.

I return to Vika, she is okay again but all her passion have dissipated.

– Are you pliable to hypnosis? – I inquire. Vika snorts scornfully: it's just a rhetorical question, there's no hypnosis pliable among divers. If we manage to overcome the drug of the deep program, it's impossible to get us with words.

– My point exactly, – I say, – We all can play the fool, but what about dunking an interlocutor into Silence?

– I'm tired too, – whispers Vika, – You know, one more hour and I'll talk such riddles that even Unfortunate will be envious…

– We'll go to sleep now. Then we'll surface without breaking connection, to have a snack. Do you have any food at home?

– Sure.

– Excellent. Eat and get a nap. We'll come back in the morning and will decide everything.

We do exactly that. I make Unfortunate to help me, together we get three big piles of fur-grove and set them near the fire. The bed turns out to be so comfortable that I hardly overcome the idea to neglect the supper.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours…

The eyelids were so heavy, I hardly managed to part them. The fire was dancing on the screens, fur-grove was rustling in headphones – Vika was tossing and turning making herself comfortable.

– Lenia, are you interrupting the immersion? – asked Windows-Home.

– No.

I took the helmet off and looked at the watch.

Late evening. Not that late though to make it uncomfortable to visit the neighbors. Beer can wait a little.

Having unplugged the suit, I calmed down the panicking computer and looked at myself in the mirror.

A clown, with a plug on a belt. Should we scare old ladies a little?

Tights were lying in the laundry wash-basin. I picked 'em up and pulled on over the virtual suit, rolled the wire and stuck it under the belt, covering it with jacket. Not too bad, a normal guy, just a bit swollen one.

A guitar was ringing in the stairwell quietly. I peeked into the peephole and opened the door.

A company of youth was perched on the patch between the floors, one of them sang quietly torturing the strings:

– Oh the lonesome bird, you're flying high…

Seeing me, the teens seemed confused for some reason, just the neighbor from the apartment above asked quickly:

– Lenia, do you have something to smoke?

I shook my head and noticed that the guy squints at the tights distended on my side, just in the size of a cigarette pack. Hardly could he guess that some people live with plugs by their belts…

I rang to the neighboring apartment, waited for shuffling steps and suspicious "Who is there?". The old woman doesn't trust the peephole or her own eyes.

– Lyudmila Borisovna, excuse me for God's sake… – I said into the door, – May I please make a call from you? My phone is broken.

After a minute of hesitation the ancient locks started to rattle. I squeezed into the narrow opening and the door shut close

immediately.

– The youth sits again? – inquired Lyudmila Borisovna. The old lady is 70+ old and doesn't risk to argue with young punks.

– Yeah.

– Why wouldn't at least you tell them, Lenia! No rest whatsoever!

No sounds from the staircase can be heard here, the granny has the powerful door but I don't argue:

– Sure I'll tell them.

– And what's wrong with your phone, huh? Didn't pay in time, got disconnected?

I nod obediently, admiring her acumen.

– You like to chat too much, don't you? – growls the old lady. We had a parallel number some time ago { *two phones connected to one number* }, but obviously it was impossible to live like this anymore. I paid for the number split and also subsidized the granny – a parallel phone was a bit cheaper for her. I think she decided I'm an idiot. But our relations greatly improved since.

– Sure, go ahead, call… – Lyudmila Borisovna nodded at the phone. Obviously she wasn't going to leave me alone.

Ah well, curiosity isn't a vice…

I dialed Maniac's number trying to ignore dirty dial disk and sticky handset.

– Allo?

– Shura, evening…

– A-ha…. – said Maniac in a satisfied voice, – Here he is… a criminal.

– Shura, they…

– Relax, I'm sorting this out. I have a license for local virus creation, they won't pick on this.

– Have you registered 'Warlock'?

– Of course, at Lozinsky's himself. All sources conform to the Moscow Convention, so they'll get nothing.

I feel relieved a little. If the virus wasn't registered with some antivirus creator, Maniac could get in a serious trouble. Certainly, I can be accused of reckless weapon use or of damage… but they'll have to find me first.

– Were you asked who bought the virus?

– Sure thing. I gave them your address… the most puny one.

A couple of years ago, when I just started to balance on the border of the law, one diver advised me to buy a couple of addresses and to never use them. So afterwards it were these nonexistent 'comrades' on whom all viruses taken from Maniac were wrote off.

– I said that you paid a grand for the virus. – Shurka goes on.

– You know, it'd be right if I…

– Relax, I have 5 requests for 'Warlock' at this price already. – Maniac laughs joyfully, – Coolness! I'm ready to buy beer for Jordan for such an advertisement. The whole Deeptown is stirred.

– Isn't the sale forbidden?

– Not yet. They are studying the source. You better tell me where were you an hour or a bit more ago?

– Well… As usual.

Lyudmila Borisovna coughed slightly, curiosity was fighting in her with an old woman's greed. The hourly charge is the worst enemy of computer people and windbags.

– Okie, in the Deep. I've dropped by, wanted to drink beer with you.

Maniac hesitates suddenly.

– You… look out of your door.

– What for?

– I rang, then sat on the bench outside, drank some beer, then ascended and rang again… Then I left a couple of Holstens under your door. Light. Look, are they still there?

I emitted the sound like the one of an old disk drive.

– Shura, what do you think, communism was declared this morning? What's wrong with you?

– Well, you just look, maybe they're there… – mumbled Maniac.

– No, they are NOT there! I'm calling from the neighbors'.

– Ah well… what the hell…

Sometimes my mind falters when I deal with real computer guys. Maybe Shurka had confused the real world and the Deep where beer costs peanuts?

– Tell somebody, they won't ever believe…

– Those who drank will, – noted Maniac gloomily.

– Come tomorrow around ten, – I asked, – We need to discuss something.

– Just don't forget to surface. I'll come.

– Bye Shurka.

I put the handset on the hook and looked at Lyudmila Borisovna confused.

– Was it too long?

– No, that's okay, – the old lady shook her head, – It's the business, don't I understand? What do you sell at least?

– Beer, – I said point-blankly.

– I liked beer myself… but is it really possible to indulge myself having such a pension?

– Lyudmila Borisovna, what if I treat you, huh? – I offered joyfully, – I just have some samples at home!

This would be the best way out, otherwise the old one will

definitely drag herself to my place to call from my phone… as a compensation of her damages. But the people with weak nerves should better not enter my apartment.

– Well, if just a bottle… – the old one livens up.

The youth on the patch traced me with greedy gazes when I was carrying a bottle of 'Oranienbaum' to the next apartment. Needless to say, two bottles of light beer for four sound loafers isn't serious.

10

I managed to find a callous frank in the freezer's depths. From canned stuff only the tin of sprats have left, I bought it either in times of dire straits or for nostalgic reasons.

I was sleepy to numbness but warmed up the poor frank anyway, took a tin opener and installed two bottles of Pilsen Urquell on the table before me. The supper in the candlelight – candles were quivering on the monitor: a screensaver. The fire scratching coming from the helmet was very much in place.

Let this Deep go to hell, together with this Unfortunate! Now, in the real world, everything that happened seemed nothing more than some absurd play. If Unfortunate doesn't confess tomorrow in the morning, me and Vika will exit the mountain space. Forever. Let him tell his tales to the cliffs and pine trees – they'll appreciate that.

I took a mouthful of beer and moaned in pleasure, then started opening the tin, cut off the cover accurately, hooked it with a fork…

And almost fell from the chair.

A hundred of fish heads was gazing at me with reproachfully.

Somewhere in virtuality I wouldn't be surprised with such joke, but in the real world…

I rummaged through heads soaked in tomato sauce trying to find at least one whole fish. Nothing. Very diligently done. I imagined a fish-factory… a kind of a floating giant… or the sprats are tinned on the shore? A conveyor with this low-grade stuff. Girls, crazed of fish stench and monotonous work… Now one of then takes an empty tin from the transporter and starts stuffing the fish heads into it. A joke.

I really laughed, shuddering and closing the tin back. I had nothing to eat but wasn't mad at the anonymous worker, on the contrary, everything suddenly have seemed perfectly in place.

Stuck to the bottle, I finished the first Urquell.

You wanted miracles, diver? The computer mind and people entering virtuality directly?

Come back to senses, diver! Here they are, miracles available to our world! Stolen beer, sprats' heads stuffed with eyes, stuffiness and foul of old lady's apartment, teenage punks in the stairways, annoying drip of water from the faucet in the kitchen.

This is – life. Whatever stupid and boring it might be, and there inside a helmet is just a tale created by machines and our own subconsciousness. Our electronic escapism.

I opened the second beer, picked up the tin, came out to the balcony and dumped out tin's contents into the wilted front garden. A feast is awaiting stray cats this night.

– Not ethical! – I reproached myself. As strongly as in Vika's program it is stuck into my mind that one shouldn't throw garbage out of the window.

But, unlike the machines we are able to ignore the bans. From balconies.

As I was, with the beer, I entered the bathroom, unbuttoned the suit glancing at the bottle. I didn't want to drink anymore.

– What is this long and cumbersome process for? – I asked rhetorically and poured the rest of the beer down into the toilet.

I lagged to the sofa and turned off the light. For how much longer is it possible to sleep huddled up by the table, with an electronic saucepan on the head? It was quiet, very quiet, and even the teens on the staircase stopped torturing their guitar.

Only the computer hummed smoothly and the candles were blinking on the screen.

I turned over forcing my face into the pillow but the sleep was retreating. There, in the Deep, the motionless dead Gunslinger's body is lying. Does he miss me? Something, just a little from betrayal is in it.

– For the last time! – I moaned, rising. I put on the helmet, plugged the suit into the port, laid my hands on the keyboard.

Deep Enter.

I snuggle close to Vika in my sleep and she mumbles something, turning to the other side. As quiet as her voice is, but I wake up. Looks like she sleeps in the Deep too.

The fire is off. Maybe the morning is close but the darkness haven't yet retreated, only red sheen from the dying fire can be seen. Unfortunate lies a bit away like a motionless mat– bag. What if I reach you and nudge you a good deal, huh? Just to see, are you here with us of exited the deep and sleep in the warm soft bed?

I look up at the sky, into the black sparkling crystal. How did I say that to Vika? "They've stolen the sky from us"?

Yes, they have, and the more people leave here, the further the stars will become.

It's not only the stars though. There always will be somebody for whom this world will stay out of reach: the restless teens who can't find work, the girls from fish packing plants… Fish heads, accurately arranged in rows in tins will come first. Is it just a joke or a silent cry, a protest? Fish heads will come first. And only then human heads will start to roll.

Does the second advent of machine destroyers await us? The rebel against machines, more and more incomprehensible and scary ones for average citizens, or the way out will be found finally?

I turn over and look at Unfortunate. If you are the mind of the

Net, if you are the human who have conquered virtuality, then you might be that very way out, the break through the barrier, the exit from this deadlock. Surely Dibenko understands that if Man Without Face is really him.

Should I play noble hiding Unfortunate? If he is salvation, a merge of two worlds?

I don't know. I'm just an ordinary man, accidentally having this stupid resistance against the deep-program. This helps me to earn my piece of bread, and sometimes – it even comes with a thick layer of butter and caviar. But it's not me who should save the world or decide what is good and what is evil for it.

I don't have anything except that funny shabby moral for which Vika was grieving, but moral is a strange thing, it never gives answers but on the contrary, it hinders from finding them.

It's much easier to be a just person or a scum than just a human.

I start feeling myself extremely bitter and lousy. A provincial sportsman might feel so, included in the Olympic team and ordered to compete with the champions. Not my destiny it is…

And at this moment a sound is born above.

I turn onto my back looking up into the blackish crystal again, and see a crack in it – a blue stripe across the whole sky, a dazzling straight arrow rushing down.

– What is it, Lenia?

Vika is already sitting, casting strands of hair from her face. When have she woke?

Or when have I fallen asleep?

What is it around us, a dream or reality?

– A meteor, – I reply to Vika.

The blue arrow is lower and lower, a thin ringing trill is its train, a clot of fire at the end – its spike.

– This is a star falling, – says Vika very seriously and I understand that I'm sleeping after all.

Unfortunate doesn't move.

The crack draws across the sky to the end and plunges into the ground. The blue strip dims – the sky knows how to cure its wounds. Only where the star have touched the ground, a pale light is glowing.

– You promised me that we'll find a fallen star, – says Vika.

Everything is simple in the dream. I rise and give her my hand, we step over Unfortunate and start descending the slope. It's wrong, one is supposed to go up to reach the star, but one shouldn't argue with dreams.

The blue flame sparkles in the grass, neither burning nor casting shadows. The star have fallen into the gully between two hills. A bit further is a conglomeration of cliffs, absolutely out of place here, as if

torn from another world. This is important for some reason but now we only look at the star.

A clean flame, a fuzzy fiery ball, very small one, one can hide it in the hands.

I stretch my hand, touch the star and feel warmth, as tender as if I've set my hands under the spring sun.

– Now I know what the stars are, – says Vika, – These are the splinters of the daylight sky.

I'm about to pick the star up but Vika stops me.

– Don't. It is tired already.

– From what?

– From the solitude, from the silence…

– But now we are near.

– Not yet. We've passed our path but it's only half of the way. Let the star believe in us.

I just shrug, I can't argue with Vika. I want to smile to her but she's not by my side anymore, only the voice have left.

– Lenia, wake up!

What the hell, why…

– Lenia, Unfortunate is gone!

I open my eyes.

Morning, the pink light from the East, scared Vika's face.

Unfortunate is not by the fire. The sleep is great deceiver.

– Damned! – I swear jumping up, – When have he disappeared?

Vika fixes her hair, in the same gesture as in my dream.

– I don't know, Lenia. I've just woke, and he was gone.

– So here's the answer, – I whisper, looking around, – Here's the answer…

Unfortunate's gone. Fled from the Deep. So everything was in vain?

No, not everything, I've met Vika because of him.

– He had made us to know each other, – she repeats my thoughts, – Thanks for that at least.

I hug her, nudging my face into her hair. We stand like this for long, the dawn brightens around, the snow crest of the huge mountain sparkles, ripping the sky. It's no birds here, maybe Vika forgot to make them but the mountains become alive even without them, filling with rustles of wind, of leaves and grasses.

– I'll make birds for these mountains, – I whisper, – If we ever restore your hut…

– I don't want to change the mountains, they are free! – objects Vika immediately.

– The birds are free too. I'll just set them out through the window and will say: "breed and multiply"!

Vika laughs quietly.

– Okay, try.

– What's so hard? – I summon up my courage – A simple program… I'll study Bram, will make a behavior algorithm. I'll draw various chaffinches and sparrows in the beginning, then hawks. Biogeocenosis… right? I've forgotten, I think we studied this in the fifth form, at the lessons of the nature study…

– Biologist you. Maybe you'll set free Zuko's slippers as well? Lenia, let's surface now and go to some restaurant. Have you ever been to "Pink atoll"?

– No.

– A beautiful place, Shultz and Brandt drew it. I invite you.

– Okay. Let's search before we go though…

Vika steps back from me and asks sharply:

– Search for whom?

– For Unfortunate.

– He exited the deep, why don't you understand?

– I do. But let's look for him anyway, okay? Maybe he wanted to go to do pee-pee and fell into the canyon?

– So he deserves it… – mumbles Vika, agreed already.

Firstly we pass the edge of the nearest slope, looking down. Then Vika searches the valley to the left from the stream, and I – to the right. Involuntarily my gaze is attracted down into the gully where I found the star in my dream: some cliffs can really be seen there.

But the business first. I must make sure that Unfortunate is not with us anymore.

I even climb up a little, following our path, it's just for the sake of it, to clear up my conscience.

And there, in the small crevice which we easily jumped over in the light of the dimming day I find Unfortunate.

I stand above the crevice silently, looking at Unfortunate from a ledge 3 meters above him. A couple of minutes passes until he makes sure that I've noticed him and raises his head.

– Good morning, Gunslinger.

I stay silent, I don't have strength even for the anger anymore.

– It's too hard to see in the dark, – utters Unfortunate an amazingly fresh and genius idea.

It wasn't that much to fall but he was unlucky. Even from above I can see that his right leg is swollen and Unfortunate is sitting trying not to touch it. I get the slippers from behind my belt, put them on and descend.

– I'm sorry, – says Unfortunate when I pick him up and scramble out of the crevice.

– Why? – I just ask.

– So that you wouldn't hesitate. I can't explain anything anyway.

– You're fool. Only suicidal ones are wandering in the mountains at night… or the Black Alpinist.

– I never was in the mountains before. And who is the Black Alpinist?

It's quite a long way down to the camp and I have time to tell him the tale of the Black Alpinist and that company that was dragging ball dresses and tuxedos to the mountains, then several real stories. We approach Vika when my store of the mountain legends runs out. I put Unfortunate on fir branches scattered by the fire under Vika's icy glare and say:

– What can be better than the mountain walk without any gear? Only the mountain walk with an injured one on the back.

I wonder, what will she do now.

– Give me the belt, – commands Vika.

I couldn't expect that much of aggressiveness.

– Vika, using 'Warlock'…

– Shit. You unfinished diver! I need a tourniquet!

I never was curious whether virtual clothes can tear or not, and don't want to try – the mountain sun is cruel. So I abandon the idea of tearing the shirt for tourniquets and give Vika my bandana.

She mingles with Unfortunate's leg for a long time, shaking her head gloomily when he moans in reply to her careful touches.

– The shin is broken, – she sets the diagnosis, – Without a shift I think, as strange as it might be.

– You're a doctor too?

– No, just a nurse, but an experienced one. I need more tourniquets.

I have to sacrifice my shirt after all and the jacket put on the naked body looks as a complete mauve tone. We put Unfortunate's leg in a self-constructed cast.

– Not even a single idiot, – now Vika allows herself to vent out her anger, – not a single cretin in this world have ever managed to break a leg in virtuality! What do you have in reality, huh? Do you have a broken leg?

– No… – mumbles Unfortunate.

– Thanks God for this at least.

We look at each other, our previous evening's battle mood have vanished. One thing is to abandon a deceiver in the virtual world, and a different one is to abandon a wounded person in the mountains, and the fact that the mountains is a fake changes nothing.

– Let's go to those cliffs, – I suggest.

– Okay. I saw them in my dream.

One glance is enough and we don't say anything else. There's no

laws for unreality. Whatever it is, a dream or reality – we descended to the fallen star together.

11

The cliffs are really out of place in this valley. The glacier might bring boulders, but not such a huge lumps.

– Looks like it's really an exit to the different space, – agrees Vika turning back to me, – Are you tired?

I shake my head. To be honest, my hands are tired to hold Unfortunate but there's no time for such trinkets now.

– If the program had really broken through to some foreign server, – reasons Vika, – then the channel will be one directional. We sure will be able to exit but if we need to flee…

– As a last resort, we have 'Warlock', – I say but without much confidence. I'm not too eager to fall into blue tunnels anymore: too weird pictures did I see on my way.

– Okay, let's go. Maybe there's nothing at all over there. – Vika sighs and steps forward. I lag after her. Unfortunate is silent, either feeling himself guilty (which is right) or doesn't want to hinder. And this is a right behavior too.

We move along the narrowing canyon. At some point I look up estimating the height of cliffs. They are obviously higher than it seemed back in the valley. Very encouraging sight indeed…

The pass becomes narrower and narrower, we can't walk side by side anymore. I start to move my side forward, this way the risk to hit Unfortunate's injured leg against the cliff is less. Maybe it would be a good idea to put the winged slippers on, but this idea came to me a bit too late, now I won't be able to turn and bend over. Vika swears quietly in front of me having problems too, I gloatingly think that Madam with her dimensions would be stuck long time ago.

It gradually becomes colder, an icy wind breaks into the slit from somewhere. This is good, very good!

– Lenchik! – says Vika in a muffled voice, – Yes!

I see the light in front of me, blocked by her silhouette. Vika shifts somewhere to the side and I step into her place. I hit the Unfortunate's leg against the wall on my last steps anyway and he moans quietly.

The canyon brings us to a weird place.

There are mountains – but different ones. They are not just uninhabited

– they're wild, as if the life was here some time ago but then something killed it. A twilight. Maybe it's day anyway but the sky is blocked by dense lead colored clouds. Everything is enveloped in desolation and dull melancholy. A path winds down the slope among black fangs of the cliffs.

– What is this? – asks Vika quietly, – Lenia?

I gaze around. No, this is a different space for sure, and I think a familiar one.

– The Elves, – I say, – This is some role-playing server. They play here.

– Like in "Labyrinth"? – speaks Unfortunate out.

– No, in a different way.

– We won't go far here, – says Vika gloomily, – Either we'll freeze or the Elves will shoot us incidentally.

– We'll freeze first, – I say. My shirt was used for tourniquets and I carelessly disposed of my jacket.

– That's okay, at least your exposed torso looks way too impressive, – says Vika ironically. Good for her to talk, she has a jersey and Unfortunate has masking overalls from "Labyrinth", it's quite warm.

– If we just had somebody to impress, – I stretch my hand, – Vika, there's a path in front of us, we should get there and search for people.

– For the Elves.

– People, Elves, Dwarves, whoever.

The snow is almost knee-deep, we slowly lag along. Unfortunate whispers guiltily:

– I don't understand anyway…

– Do you know who Tolkien is?

– He's an author…

– Just please don't recite "The Lord of the Rings" by heart, okay? So, this is a virtual space created by his fans, role-players. They congregate here, put on the bodies of his characters and play various plots, either Tolkien's or other authors'.

– A theater, – decides Unfortunate.

– Well… sort of.

Unfortunate silences, completely satisfied by explanation while I'm still quite far from complete clarity.

What server is it? What are the laws of this particular world? Where are allowed exits located through which we could get Unfortunate out?

I even fear to think about what to do next.

The path is well treaded down as if a whole army marched here not long ago. The snow melts as soon as it touches the path, maybe due to the magic. Role-playing world lives according to its own laws, the magic exists here.

– Where should we go now? – with this phrase Vika sets the command upon me. It's so fluttering to be trusted… I wish I could justify this trust. I try to remember role-playing spaces' maps but abandon this idea immediately, these are drawn by whoever wants to.

And at this moment I hear a quiet drumming from behind the nearest cliff, either a mad horse with castanets on its legs or a giant with jaws clattering of cold.

There's no time to think.

– Here, quick! – I whisper and dive into wilted fir grove, put Unfortunate on the snow and press a finger to my lips, – Tssss…

Vika and Unfortunate can't be seen from the path. I stand on it, outstretching my legs widely and pull off the belt. 'Warlock' unwraps into the fiery lash with a rumble.

I must look pretty scary, a gloomy male naked down to his belt, with the shoulders powdered with snow. I ve modeled Gunslinger's body sinewy and strong, it's immediately seen that he's a mighty fighter… and this glowing lash in his hand too… any troll would be scared.

The clatter comes closer.

I make a bloodthirsty grimace and wait.

A little figure, hardly as high as my chest comes out from behind the cliff.

A giant with clattering jaws indeed…

The face and build of the traveler is like the child's but something is definitely wrong with his hormones: his legs, bare up to his knees, are covered with thick fur. Oh yeah, with such paws it's cozy even in the snow. A little drum hangs on traveler's chest and he beats on it with sticks as he walks.

A hobbit.

That's good.

Noticing me, the hobbit stops dead on his tracks, even one drumstick falls in the snow.

– Hee-hee… – I say evilly.

The hobbit doesn't drum anymore but his jaws really start to chatter.

– Who? – I demand, stretching 'Warlock' towards the hobbit. The lash starts to lengthen excitedly and I have to pull it back quickly.

– Harding, s…sir! – whispers hobbit.

– Who? – I ask again in a normal voice this time. But poor hobbit is in utter panic now, he even doesn't try to grab a small dagger carelessly stuck behind his belt.

– H-harding, kind sir. S-sam sired Frodo, Frodo sired Holfast, Holfast sired Harding…

– You, huh?

– Me, kind sir!

– Quite in vain!

– Yes, kind sir, – agrees Harding obediently.

– Don't 'sir' me! – I bellow, – And even more – I'm not kind at all!

I'm… – the sudden inspiration strikes me, – Conan! Brave Conan the Kimmerian!

Hobbit definitely have heard of Conan, he starts to nod frequently, not asking how the hell had Howard's character got into Tolkien's world. Though, role-players are the folks that are easily carried away and such trinkets don't limit them. I could even call myself Koschej The Immortal { *a Russian folklore evil character* } if my build would allow me to.

– Where are you going? – I go on with questioning circling around the hobbit. He turns around trying not to lose me from his sight.

– Catching up with the a-army…

– What the hell army?

– The Elvish one… We go to beat the Orcs and the Dwarves!

– Why?

– Because they are bad!

I start to be more and more sure that it's a little kid in the hobbit's body. An adult would find more serious arguments and of course would try to fight.

– Army… – I say thoughtfully, – Ah, yes! I remember, there was one…

The dread is in hobbit's eyes. He squints at the fiery lash, not doubting the sad fate of the Elvish army anymore.

– I've heard that you hobbits are marsupial, – I inform, – Huh?

The hobbit shakes his head in shock and presses his hands against his stomach.

– Any grub?

Brave Harding gives me his rucksack, where I find a couple of cookies, a chunk of smoked meat, a flask; I soften.

– Provident you are, hobbit… And what is this?!

I hook out 'Snickers' from the sack's bottom.

The hobbit bursts into tears immediately. Yeah, the kid alright.

I tear the wrapping from the candy with teeth, bite off a half, the rest of it I return to the hobbit. He stops crying at once.

– How do you think, will you beat the Dwarves? – I inquire. One can't just rob the guy and let him go. What about to chat?

– We will! – nods the hobbit, – They make arrows from yew-tree, and these are bad! And also they fight in 'hird', and this formation is bad… { *Hird – a native Dwarvish battle formation, a kind of phalanx, described by Nick Perumov in his book "The Ring of Darkness"* } I don't have even a bit of eager to get into details of the quarrel between the Elves and the Dwarves.

– Is a city far from here?

– Lorien is 5 miles away…

Something is wrong with geography here… oh well, never mind. If I also could find out the server name…

– Who is ruling this land?

– Fair Legolas the Elf!

Alrighty, this information is enough.

– Go, – I say hanging the hobbit's sack on my shoulder.

Harding doesn't protest against the robbery. Even more, he shyly asks:

– Can I go with you Conan? They'll beat the Dwarves without me, I guess.

Yeah right… I do really need that… I make an evil grimace again and whisper:

– Don't you know that the hobbit is not only costly fur? Also it is 30-40 kilos of tasty, easily digested meat!

Books don't lie, hobbits really can run fast: just furry heels blink away in the snow dust.

I return to Vika and Unfortunate in the best mood. They heard the talk, so I don't have to repeat it for them.

– Here's the food, – I hand the sack to Unfortunate, – Now we'll make a bed for you and will exit the Deep. We'll return openly, through Lorien, with normal gear and will get you out of here. Okay?

Unfortunate nods.

– You'll have to wait for three-four hours… – I say thoughtfully, – Is it okay?

Though we don't have any other choice anyway. I won't be able to drag him under the snow, half naked, for five miles. Together with Vika we make a bed from twigs under the old fir tree, put Unfortunate on it and hand the sack with trophies to him. A light alcoholic beverage is in the flask, one better not use it to warm up in the real frost but why not in virtuality?

– Let's surface? – I ask Vika, – We'll meet in three hours… say, at the entrance into Legolas' server.

She nods, a moment – and her form dissolves in the air.

– Take care Unfortunate, – I say.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours…

I exited right in time, it's 9:45 AM.

– Immersion completed, – I ordered to Windows-Home and attacked the fridge. Without any result, of course.

– Downloading the mail, – informed the computer.

Hurriedly dressed, I ran out to the street. Fortunately it was almost nobody in the shop around the corner, and I was back by 10, just in time to tap Maniac on the shoulder who was dolefully ringing my doorbell.

– Gonna down some nourishments?

– Yup. Will you?

– Me too. But later. – Maniac squeezed into apartment before me. While I was shaking off my shoes, he was by the computer. When I padded to him, he had already shut down Windows and was squirting along the Norton cube marking file by file.

– What are you doing? – I asked in shock.

– Trying to save you from debtor's prison, – replied Maniac deleting programs, – 'Warlock' was rehabilitated: a clean, not spreading virus, never damaging data. Allowed to use in virtuality. Allowed to be used at one's own risk…

My computer have lost a couple more files. The winged slippers seemed to perish too…

– … But "Labyrinth" and Al-Kabar have hung two and a half million dollars in damages on you.

I even feel joy of such an amount.

– Why not a billion? There's no difference, I won't ever earn this much anyway… and even never steal.

– Sure… it might have been billion… – agreed Maniac jerking the mouse across the mousepad, – When did you clean the mouse last time? Now, listen here. Gunslinger is no more, and never existed – on your machine. Insert a different personality in the seventh position. If possible, provide alibi… How did you manage to get them so, Len'ka?

– I've dragged one guy right from under their grasps… Saved.

– That's good of course…

Maniac have stuffed a diskette into the drive, started some program from it.

– Now we'll clean your winchesters so well, there'll be no trace even on the physical level. – he threatened, – Or, even better, just sell these and buy new ones. Or throw them into the Neva river from the bridge.

I felt discomfort. Maniac would never panic without a reason.

– Got some vodka?

– Cognac…

– Not so good, but will do, – he frowned.

I gave him the bottle, ready for Shurka to pour an alcohol into computer guts, for the complete guarantee of success… But he took a mouthful himself, then extracted the ball from the mouse, breathed on it, rubbed it against his sleeve and put it back. Then he informed:

– We'll commemorate the sale of three viruses. You advertised 'Warlock' well.

– Shur, I need to go back…

– Gee, you can't be serious, diver! – laughed Maniac without turning around, – You must hide now!

– I can't. Impossible.

He just shrugged and advised:

– Sell your winchesters anyway.

– I was going to upgrade the whole thing…

– Really? Well, so go ahead and sell it with all its guts. Or donate it to some kids' club. You won't earn much for this piece of crap, while kiddies will kick it to death in a week, nobody will be able to restore it.

Remembering the robbed hobbit I nodded uncertainly.

Maybe I really should rejoice the young generation with an old comp?

And just how proud I was when I bought it… Pentium! Two megs of video memory! Sixteen megs of RAM!

– How can you live with this video card? – replied Shurka to my memoirs, – Shit, it even doesn't receive TV?!

For around five next minutes I was lectured about cutting edge technologies in hardware. Then Maniac sent me to cook breakfast and went on with cleaning my machine.

I was cooking scrambled eggs – maybe 10000th portion of it in my life. It's high time to invent single's anniversaries: 1000th tin of canned stuff, 100000th loaf of bread eaten dry…

– Shurka, I only have two and a half hours! – I shouted from the kitchen, – Then I have to work!

– You'll not be late…

– I also still need to draw the new personality!

– Which one?

– A fairy tale one. An Elf or a Dwarf… No, an Elf is better. The Dwarf will be beaten immediately.

– Since when are you befriended with role-players?

– It's a work., – I said setting the pan by the keyboard, – I need to take a walk in their server.

– Lord, what can you steal there?! They are all beggarly! – Maniac shook his head, – Brrr… Texts of Elvish anthems? The secrets of

wooden swords' manufacturing?

– No, I… forgot one thingy there.

– Ah… – Maniac nodded. Maybe he thought that 'Warlock' had gnawed the exit into the role-playing server directly. – Just don't hurt them, okay? They are funny folks, I wandered into those places a couple of times…

– You set up security for them?

– Me? For them? Come on, there's plenty of their own specialists! – Shurka waved his hand, – There's lots of cool programmers.

I didn't like this news.

– Well, tell me at least what 'Warlock' looked like in action?

– Well… a blue crater, sparks and mirrors under my feet with reflections of other servers in them.

Maniac raised his head:

– Wasn't there an elevator? – he asked in confusion.

– Come on, what elevator?! Just a hole in the floor…

– It's always like this, you invent something and it turns out like… – growled Shurka, – Shit. Do you have cognac only?

We poured in a little, touched cups and drank. Shurka's programs were still 'rustling' inside my machine.

– I've tried it yesterday… that rhyme… – said Maniac after the second cup, – That "abyss-abyss" one…

I didn't ask him about results. If Maniac could manage to exit the Deep, this would be what we are drinking for now.

– Lenia, if you ever find out why it happens… – began Shurka.

– I'll tell you immediately.

– Geez, and what a mess was it in one brothel yesterday… – Maniac changed the topic. – Haven't you heard in the Net news?

I even felt confused.

– No…

– Some punks attempted to break the security of "Any Amusements" brothel. There is one with this name… – Maniac half closed his eyes in a sweet and delighted expression.

– They attempted?

– Well, they almost broke it but then their security have just cut off all channels completely. That fight was worth seeing if Zuko doesn't tell the bull.

– Who?

Obviously the expression on my face became too stupid. Shurka gazed at me, then said quietly:

– A-ha… I see.

– You know Zuko? Computer Wiz?

– Don't you tell me you don't know him.

– Only in the Deep, – I don't attempt to lie.

Shurka shook his head.

– You think so? It's Sergey… the one who worked in the bank.

Uh-oh, what a news.

I know Sergey for ages. When I was working in that computer games company, he was working there too, but I felt it absolutely impossible to correlate the ever silent and phlegmatical programmer with the noisy Computer Wiz.

– It's him?!

– Yup.

– Gosh, what a disguise… – I was only able to say.

– Well, just imagine if he would confess that he works for a brothel! Isn't it a great topic for jokes? He still keeps everybody believing that he botches proggys for that bank…

– Don't tell him that me is me, – I asked quickly.

– I won't. He didn't tell me any details either. Just questioned me about 'Warlock'.

– Zuko recognized your virus! – I exclaimed remembering Wiz's joy.

– Well, yeah, I showed him around a month ago… – Shurka narrowed his eyes, – Secrecy, damn it…

– Can he tell anybody?

Maniac shook his head.

– Not this is the real problem Lenia. Information has a property to slip away. Some stupid little blunders and coincidences like this one… They'll find you.

– Let them try to prove!

– Lenia… if you really did stomp on their tails so hard, they won't bother to prove anything. All of us are tied too closely. Somebody knows that Gunslinger and Leonid is the same guy. Somebody suspects that Leonid is diver. Somebody guesses that Leonid is Russian. Virtuality is living by information, by truth, rumors, guesses. And the most important thing is that any information can be easily gathered and analyzed. If to try really hard, one can learn everything!

– So what do you suggest?

– Get your ass out of here. – suggested Shurka pouring in the remaining cognac. – It'll be bad that I won't be able to drink beer with you anymore but… if you're dead, it'll be much worse… Shit, what, what the hell are you doing?!

– I'm rescuing a person.

– One should do it until he's not in trouble himself!

I nodded. Maniac is right. There's the normal hacker's logic in his words, not the one of the self-assured diver who can surface from the Deep.

Where would I surface if overtaken in the real world?

Complexes of physical weakness are strong in all virtual folks. It hurts too much to feel that you're God in the virtual world, but just one of the billions of ordinary people in the real one. That's why we all love martial arts and war games, buy gas and pneumatic pistols, stubbornly attend sport clubs and pump ourselves up in the evenings. Of course we want to feel ourselves as invincible in the real life as we are in virtuality, sure so. But we fail to.

And sometimes one can hear in the Deep: "Remember that guy? Some punks had stuck a knife in him in the alley… got poisoned with fake vodka… jumped out of the window, didn't even leave a note… crossed mafia's path…"

We remember, we know.

Only in the world beyond the screen we're Gods.

– I need just a day more, I suppose, – I said quietly, – Then I'll get out somewhere… to Siberia or the Ural Mountains.

– And don't tell anybody where you go, – nodded Maniac, – Don't even tell me.

The cups were empty and he suggested:

– Should I run to the kiosk for more?

– I still have to draw the body.

– Shit. Run 'Bioconstructor'.

In a minute we were sitting side by side fighting over control for the mouse and drumming against the keyboard. The first drawn body we had to reject – it was way too provoking: two meter high hefty chap, with a huge sword on his belt. All adventurers would pester him as Shurka noted and I had to agree with him.

The next personality was harmless and even pitiful: a tattered old beggar… maybe nobody would touch him, but he won't be able to carry Unfortunate for five miles either. This time it was me who vetoed without explanations.

But the third attempt was successful. The guy on the screen was quite strong but with such a babylike innocent face that I felt sick. We dressed him in the ground-long light-green chlamys and hung a rag bag onto his shoulder.

– A healer! – said Maniac satisfied, – A human, healer. Nobody will hurt you there without a reason, neither Elf nor Orc. Medicine is the thing everybody needs.

He started to stuff some jars, retorts, dry leaves into the bag, taking them from accessories menu.

– Will I be able to heal in the role-players' world?

– Sure. The situation there is like this – you come in this or that image and initially have some strength. For instance, a martial art or wisdom or gift of healing. The longer you live in that world, the stronger your abilities are. If you call yourself a healer, you'll be

immediately able to fix small wounds or fractures, dislocations…

– How interesting, – I said looking at my new personality, I even started to like it. – Thanks, I would dress as a warrior for sure.

– Yeah, and would get knocked on the head by some old-timer's sword.

– Well, and in what image did you go there?

Maniac was confused.

– You won't tell anyone?

– No.

– I was Ariel the Elvish warrior.

– Why?

– Tried to score Goromir.

For a second I froze. It's none of my business of course, but…

– Goromir is a girl, – explained Maniac quickly, – It's a bloody mess over there, girls play men often and guys play women. I tried to score her for half a year…

– Any success?

– No… Goromir befriended Dianel.

I don't dare to ask who was Dianel in reality: a guy or a girl, too gloomy Shurka's tone was.

– If you meet Goromir there, say hi from Ariel, – adds Shurka, – We parted quite… well. Friendly. Shit.

– I need the server with the city of Lorien, ruled by Legolas. Is this a place where he… this Goromir of yours pastures?

– It's a 'she'! – cuts Shurka off, – I Dunn, haven't been at role-players' for ages. We'll find out.

He loaded Vika and started to browse through servers using terminal. In around five minutes the search was successful.

– Look! "Fair Legolas invites the wise Elves, the brave Humans and the quick Hobbits to the great city of Lorien, for the days of the last battle of the forces of the Good against the Orcs and the Dwarves have come!" They'll meet you with an open hug.

– This isn't necessary.

– Uh… what about some more beer? You have an hour and a half more.

A beer after cognac? Well, but I really have a lot of time, with Shurka's help we were through the drawing really fast.

– Okay, – I decide.

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I locked the door after Shurka, fixed the door chain very-very accurately, looked into the kitchen to make sure gas is off.

I didn't feel myself drunk. Four bottles of beer is nothing and cognac doesn't count at all. Some odd wires, old slippers, scattered books were tangling under my feet all the way to the computer – Shurka stumbled and overturned the bookshelf when clung to it trying to keep balance. What could that mean?

– Vika, any mail? – I growled.

– I didn't understand you, Leonid.

– Any mail? – I repeated slowly.

– Yes.

Maybe two liters of dark beer, drunk in haste is not that little after all if Vika doesn't recognize my voice?..

I suppressed the fit of guilt and started to look through mail: some crap only. I should also take a look at the Bulletin Board.

Of course, none of my employers or friends knows my real address. If somebody wants to contact not just Leonid, but the diver, there's only one way – to post an ad at the Bulletin Board which is just a computer with a modem and lots of disk space to which anyone can connect and read all ads. A coded label allows to filter out unnecessary posts, the code doesn't allow lamers to fake the messages and the vague phrases of the letters themselves will be clear to the addressee only. Complete anonymity and reliability. Go ahead and try to extract secret information from love affairs, commercials and idle chat.

It's not often that I find messages for me on the Bulletin Board, but it was two of them today.

"Ivan! In the eve of the forest journey I'll wait for you at the place where we did division. Gray."

This is Romka. We "did division" in "Three Piglets", and the eve of Al-Kabar operation was a quarter of hour ago.

I sobered suddenly. Why would Romka look for me so urgently? He wrote the letter this night. Did he do it himself or at somebody's bidding I wonder? Man Without Face's, for instance?

The second message was expected.

"Seventy-seven. Where usual, as usual. Brothers."

Seventy-seven is my number. Brothers-divers are outraged…

According to the Code, I told my diver's name (also being the real one, by the way) to Anatol and Dick.

According to the Code, they filed a complaint against me: I intruded into their working territory and used weapons.

This can't be forgiven.

– Unfortunate… – I mumbled, – Bastard… What the hell are you doing with me?

Damned the moment when I was lured by the Medal of Complete License and rushed to rescue you!

– Vika, submersion, – I ordered, – Personality number seven… Healer.

I know three Romka's personalities, even four if to count the wolf. But today he appeared in a new one: a little scraggy youngster in glasses and with tousled hair. He stands by the bar, gazing around and in no way reminds an accurate Roman. I recognize him only when he drinks a glass of pepper vodka in one shot.

– Romka?

– Lenia?

We shake hands.

– Wanna drink? – asks the guy.

– No… I've… already, in reality.

– Alcoholic, – mumbles Roman. Yeah, says who? Considering his immunity to alcohol… – Len'ka, do you know in what deep shit you are?

– Yes. How deep?

– A complaint was filed against you… by somebody called Anatol' and Tosser. Details of the charge were not yet made public.

I nod. – I know about that.

– What, there are more troubles expected?

– Tons.

We often work together, I sympathize the werewolf and looks like Romka returns that.

– Lenia, what's the matter?

– Think a little.

Roman frowns and suddenly takes off the glasses nervously.

– Is "Warlock" your work? – he whispers.

– Good guess.

– It means that "Labyrinth"…

– Shhhhh… – I remember Shurka's words about spreading of information,

– Let's not talk about that.

Romka calls the bartender – today it is a program obviously – and refills his glass.

– Gee Len'ka, this is cool… – he mumbles, – Man you're in trouble… Up to the neck!

I suddenly understand that the werewolf is not scared by the severity of my troubles, neither does he worry about me – he's admired! He's ecstatic of such turmoil of action, of being himself

lighted by a sheen of the scandalous fame. If we, being completely selfish, still can see an idol in another diver then I became one for Romka.

– If you need my help during sorting the things out, you'll get it, and not from me only!

Maybe I'll need that… maybe I'll get it. Roman is a very social guy, and a recognized leader in a narrow circle of divers-werewolves.

– I'll have to leave anyway, and for a long time, – I confess honestly.

Roman blinks quickly:

– What? From the Net? Are you serious?

It can't be more serious… I nod.

– Oh… and how will you live? – asks Romka in confusion.

Only we, the virtual world dwellers, can understand each other.

How can one live without the time, compressed by the Deep, without instant travels from the cool of the restaurant to the hot sand of the beach, without drawn jungles and imaginary mountains, without endless boiling flow of information, without ancient anecdotes and just finished books, without masquerade of bodies and costumes, without hundreds, thousands of friends and acquaintances living in all parts of the world?

How?

One must visit Deeptown to understand what he loses.

– I don't know Romka… But "Labyrinth" and Al-Kabar…

He nods. Everything is clear: elephants fear mice in tales only, and against these corporations we're not even mice, but just plant-louse.

– Lenia, if you need money… – says Romka suddenly. – I can return my part. You did almost all the job after all, and it was you who suffered. You'll need it if you're going to hide.

I shake my head, Romka is a good guy but I don't need such sacrifice.

– If possible… I'd like to ask you for a different thing…

– Whatever you need!

– I'll have to flee, to tangle my traces. I don't want to use hotels… if it'd be possible to stay at your place for a couple of months, until the noise calms down…

I don't know myself why do I ask for that. Maybe I just don't want to leave the Deep completely? To be able to watch the virtual world at least through Romka's eyes? To feel the electronic pulse, to swallow information…

– I won't be a burden… – I add.

But looking at Romka's face I understand that the offer didn't pass.

– No.

– Sorry. – I shrug, – I understand.

We fear each other anyway, it's easier for us to sacrifice huge money and to calm our conscience with that than to disclose who we are.

– You don't understand a thing… – mumbles Romka, – Do you want me to give you my real address? A city, a street, a house?

– No.

– I really can't receive you, – he averts his look, – These are… family problems.

We build palaces for ourselves in the Deep, but what about the real world?

For instance, I can accept guests despite the size of my apartment, but what if for the one of the same size Romka has a wife, mother in law and three snotty kids?

– Understood, – I put my hand on his shoulder, – I really understand, no offence.

But Romka looks past me anyway.

– I should go, – I say.

– Will you be at the meeting?

– Sure.

– And where are you going now?

It's a great temptation to keep mysterious silence and this surely would be the most reasonable choice, but I reply anyway:

– To scare the Elves a little. I need to go, Romka. See you.

When I leave "Three Piglets", he takes one more glass of vodka. Lord, this is atrocious! Or is he such a strong diver that doesn't feel intoxicated of so much alcohol?

Role-players don't advertise themselves much. There are exceptions like "Elvish Meadows" but this is more of a tourist attraction where the fairy tales' characters earn their living… or rather money to pay electricity and phone bills to be exact.

The server where Lorien is built belongs to somebody in Russia, this is all that I could find out without breaking laws, and the company that hangs there is mostly Russian– speaking. Of course I could drop by there as a tourist too, but who knows how this would end? This is just like if a Christian would arrive to Mecca and immediately drag himself to see the Black Rock in boots, hat and with a golden plated cross on the chest.

No, I'd better be a newbie who read too much Tolkien, Howard, Perumov and all those others who paid their tribute to the romantics of swords and dragons!

I get out of the cab by the shabby two floor lopsided wreck. I must admit that the squalor of the building is done well, it's much

harder to imitate poverty and desolation than wealth and splendor.

The whole street here doesn't shock with beauty though: some blind buildings, warehouses, offices closed until better times. Role-players don't like noise. Vika isn't here for some reason, just some Elf hangs about the entrance: a fragile golden-haired creature of vague gender and age, dressed in light-green tights and darker jacket, a bow and a quiver with arrows is behind Elf's back.

I stop by the door and wait. The Elf squints his eyes at me, then takes a cigarette and lighter from the bosom. He inhales then releases a cloud of smoke. Smoking Elf isn't a look for the weak nerved person: looks like he would die after the very first inhalation, illustrating the harm nicotine might cause… Geez!

– Vi… – I start and cut off, what if it isn't her?

– Vi-vi! – says the Elf cheerfully, – Both Vi and Mi… Lenia?

The voice is changed too, must be a sound correction program. It looks as if Robertino Loretti have got into virtuality somehow.

– You? – I ask just in case.

Vika understands my doubts.

– Hobbit isn't only costly fur! – she informs joyfully, – Recognized me?

– Why the Elf?

– We're on their territory after all, it'll be safer.

– And what's your name?

– MacKerel.

– What?!

– A nice Elvish name. I'm from the Scottish Elves.

I get a slight suspicion that Vika also got a use of something 'cheering up'.

– So… who are you, he or she?

– I didn't draw the details, didn't have time for that, – declares Vika-MacKerel carelessly, – We'll act according to situation.

It's stupid to hang by the building any longer and we enter. A narrow dark corridor, the walls covered by some sort of graffiti of a battle genre. A white shining glows at the end of the corridor, a human figure can be guessed vaguely behind it.

– Who are you? – we are called.

– We heard the summons of fair Legolas and came to help! – I shout.

– Stay where you are! What are your names?

– MacKerel of the fair Loch Ness Elves! – declares Vika.

– Elenium the Healer, from the country of Tranquilia! { *Elenium – a tranquilizer drug* } Vika elbows me under my ribs but nothing can be done – the name is already invented and told.

The man that hides behind the shining, thinks.

– Did you come together?

– Yes, – answers Vika. She takes the leadership and I'm glad, I'm not in the best mood now to play the fool thoughtfully and seriously.

– And what could befriend the fair Elf and the human healer?

– In a fight with the Orcs I was treacherously wounded with a yew arrow! – exclaims Vika. She still avoids defining her gender. – If it wasn't for the magic powers of Elenium, you wouldn't see me now stranger!

I stand there with a stony straight mug but it takes a great effort.

– What will you say Elenium?

– A gang of foul Dwarves, formed in a hird… – I remember the tale of the little hobbit, – treacherously attacked me! If it wasn't for MacKerel's bravery, I'd…. I'd…

I don't know how to finish and just cover my face with both hands. Silent laughter sounds very much like crying.

The glow gives way and the old man steps into the corridor. His moves are so abrupt and the voice is so young that he doesn't fit for more than 20.

– I'm glad to welcome the brave Elf and his… her… – he hesitates, – his wise healer friend! You're safe now!

– Thanks, – I whisper.

– You, wise Elenium, get 10 points of skill, five of stamina and five – of strength, – informs the old guy, – As for you… errr… MacKerel… you get 10 points of skill, 10 of stamina, 10 of strength and 10 – of bravery.

– Hey, why was I left without bravery? – I say with indignation.

– Tears don't fit men! – proclaims the old man grandly, but MacKerel backs me up using the obvious fact that the gatekeeper sympathizes him… or her.

– Elenium cries his bitter tears in the memory of his older brother Seduksen who perished by foul Dwarves' paws! { *Seduksen – another tranquilizer* } Oy, I think Vika overplays…

Luckily, the young old guy either doesn't know pharmacology or has a sense of humor.

– Okay, you'll get 5 points of bravery, – he decides generously. – Thus, enter the fair city of Lorien and gather your strength before the final battle!

Obeying to his gesture, we enter the shining and discover a massive iron door at the end of the corridor.

– Seduksen the older brother you say? – I whisper standing behind Vika's back.

– Oh come on, don't be mad…

Then we enter the streets of Lorien.

I stand there for a couple of minutes, looking around. Damned,

it's really beautiful!

Giant trees with snow-white rind, dark green and crimson gold of the foliage. Paths paved with white stone. Some kinds of platforms and dwellings are built in the trees, connected with wooden stairs.

– Nice work, – comments Vika professionally, – Fine fellows, to build all this just of pure enthusiasm…

I could note that she herself had built the mountain world of pure enthusiasm but I don't want to remind her about the country that is maybe lost forever.

– We need to find an exit, – decides Vika.

We walk along the white path enjoying the surrounding beauty. The air is fresh and sweet, slight frost bites our cheeks. There is no snow, maybe the Elvish magic dissipates the clouds. Medieval music can be heard on the limit of hearing. Too bad there's not many people around, everybody must have left to beat the Dwarves and the Orcs.

Under one of the snow white trees a fire is set and a grinding wheel is installed. A robust hairy man tries to sharpen the sword using the wheel, under the Elf's supervision.

– Don't just pass by, travelers! – calls us the Elf and we stop. – Are you new around?

Vika nods.

– Aren't we related, the Highborn one? – asks the Elf Vika.

– No, my fair brother, – she waves her hand, – Tell us please how can we leave the city and catch up with the army.

The Elf frowns.

– Your skill isn't too high. Stay with me, learn to sharpen swords. Just three hours – and your skill will grow up five points!

Yeah right, what a joy – to rotate nonexistent grinding wheel to get nonexistent skill!

– We're in hurry, – says Vika.

– Then ascend this mallorn, – the Elf nods towards one of the trees. – Just 6 hours of physical exercise on the stairs – and you'll get 7 points of both strength and stamina!

It seems to me that the Elvish sword sharpener is simply bored. His ward obviously finishes getting his 5 skill points and the Elf will have to sit here alone.

– It's a pleasure to listen to your speech, oh Highborn Elf, – declares Vika, – But we're anxious to be in the battle.

– Then go there! – the Elf waves his hand gloomily and goes for the man with a sword, – How do you sharpen it? Look just what are you doing! Is it a sword or a silverware, huh? I won't count your skill!

We leave in the said direction hastily. Gee, it's austere here.

Lorien's charms fade somehow.

– And I thought they only do swordfights here… – whispers Vika

in surprise.

– No, they also study Elvish and Dwarvish languages, sharpen swords and daggers, study medieval economics, write ballads and legends.

– Oh yeah, tons of useful experience indeed…

– Sure, you wish you could just shut all RP servers… – I suggest spitefully.

– No, this is their right, – Vika doesn't yield to my provocation, – it's just a bit dull. Yet another chewing gum for the brains.

– Well, do you know how many more subcultures of this sort exist? At least these don't do drugs or organize revolutions.

– Lenia, I don't dream of uniformity. Everyone finds fun according to his taste. But all this is escapism, the flight from the real life.

– Or course it is. Stamps collecting and playing poker, big politics and tiny wars with the neighbors – all this is the flight from the real life. There's no common valuables in the world, so one must find some tiny, very tiny goals. And to sacrifice his life to them.

– Ya know, this way one would want to even believe in Communism.

– Well, why not? The beautiful and big goal. And as for sacrificing the life for it – this is a tradition actually…

MacKerel the brave Elf looks at me sadly.

– Lenia… Elenium… What about you, do you have any goal in you life? Any goal? Not to just steal a couple of grands, not to have fun with friends in restaurant, but the Goal?

– Yes, – I say honestly.

– Is it a secret?

I pause for a second.

– You know… I'd like to never need to get the keys from my pocket when I return home.

Vika in her Elvish mask averts her gaze.

– It's very-very small and ridiculous, – I say, – It's not even sharpening of nonexistent swords… or studying psychos in the virtual space. And of course it's not communism or world-wide revolution. But I just want to ring by my door – and it would be opened.

– I want this too sometimes, – answers Vika at last, – But I already had to come back home when the door could be opened. And… it wasn't always fun.

Get it diver, right on the face…

– Lenia, let's go, we must get Unfortunate out. – says MacKerel the brave warrior.

So we walk to the wall that girds Lorien. It's more crowded here: a dozen of recruits earn their strength points under the supervision of Elvish sages, fencing with their swords and shooting at targets. Buyers

walk along the row of shops where the merchants earn their skill points. They maybe earn something too. A tattered artist draws portraits of all who wants them, a magician (probably a petty wizard) juggles with fiery balls. The life boils up. A guy with the guitar, a human but dressed in the green Elvish costume sings:

A traveling minstrel knocked into the castle gates And a young maid opened the door for him…

A little group of listeners doesn't look too enthusiastic, so the bard cuts the ballad off, looks around and shifts to some terrible kind of local chastooshkas:

Once an Elf named Legolas Hit nazgul right in the eye!

That's why poor old nazgul Nearly drowned in the river!

The crowd likes this awkward little song much more, they applaud, throw small coins to the minstrel and laugh. We pad off silently.

– Do we need anything? – Vika points at the shops.

– What about money?

– Look in your pockets.

I put my hand into the pocket and really find 5 copper coins there.

– These are automatically given to everyone who enters, – explains Vika, – I heard about that.

In one shop, after an excited bargaining with the merchant, we buy two flasks of local wine and two short daggers. We're not going to fight anyway, so we don't need all those swords, spears and halberds that are being sold in the shops, but attraction to weapons is something genetically etched in the man's organism. Under reproachful Vika's gaze I wander along the displays studying the means of extinguishing of my kind. It's dark in the shop, but burning candles are installed under displays' glass near the weapons. The light reflecting in the blades is bloody red. I remember the flower sellers who put candles in their aquariums with flowers in winter.

Life and death are so close, their dresses look almost similar.

Two people sit by the table in the corner of the shop, not familiar ones, I almost pass them but then stop.

A short robust guy dressed in white is unfamiliar, but…

– … Puke inducing stuff! – says the robust one behind my back, – Cheap and cheesy. Not a dime worthy. Complete degeneration in everything.

I suddenly feel a disgust like I felt once being a kid, long time ago, when swimming in the river I surfaced and saw a huge toad on the bank right before my eyes. The guy behind straightens a cap pulled low over his eyes and goes on:

– Your RP was unusual before, it contained some healthy element.

Now it's total bullshit and crap.

– Look, it's too much… – replies the one who sits with Cap, – The youth needs to have some fun…

– I always tell what I think. I tell the truth. – declares Cap flatly and I suddenly understand: this is not a figure of speech, not a mistake. He really thinks so, he doesn't divide himself and the truth.

Ohmygosh…

– That's why nobody loves you, – objects Cap's interlocutor.

– Ha. Love is a lie already. When you record everything in dynamic, this becomes obvious.

The merchant across the display notices that I froze above it and livens up. He pads to me and pushes his finger into the glass under which the sword lies.

– A very, very good weapon! But you can buy it only if you already have 100 skill points!

Cap harps on behind my back:

– The game lowered to the needs of the herd, it had lost its developing role. Strength points, minstrels, magicians… Crap! Think about it.

– Do you want to look at the sword? – asks the merchant politely.

I cast a glance at Cap. His interlocutor, one of the famous role players obviously, asks:

– So what do you suggest?

– The situation is absolutely clear already, – declares Cap, – I'd prefer to look whether you'll be able to find an adequate solution…

– No, thanks, – I say to the merchant, – I'm still way too far from 100 points.

I exit the shop, into the fresh air, to awaiting Vika. Looks like she haven't noticed her former customer.

– What were you looking for there? – asks Vika.

– For a life.

– Found it?

I shrug, – Doesn't seem so.

When we proceed to the city gates, past the minstrel, past the magician and fencing recruits, I suddenly understand a strange thing.

There's a lot of truth in Cap's words, in the ones he tells to the girls in brothel or to the Elves in Lorien. The truth is the disguise of cynicism.

Maybe this is a goal as well – to consider oneself the Truth. To step through the Deep as a proud prophet of it, sweeping a dirt of peoples' vices from white cuffs with disgust, to suffer for the Truth and to accuse the lies.

And all this is because of one single reason – of being unable to love people.

I see this world and it's funny for me to see the kids sharpening drawn swords, studying Dwarvish language and selling the void. But it's not yet IT… One more step is required, a very little one – a bit further. Not to love.

Neither mysterious Unfortunate, nor the silly little hobbit, nor the virtual prostitute Vika, nor the merchant in the shop, nor the minstrel with guitar, nor Romka the werewolf, nor Man Without Face…

Nobody.

It's so simple after all, they all are full of drawbacks. One can be mad at all of them, and to despise all of them… No, not that. Not to be mad but simply not to love.

I feel like opening some kind of heavy and narrow door and looking into another world, the sterile white one, frozen down to absolute zero, dead and clean as the computer CPU.

– Vika, – I whisper, – Vika…

Why do we go to rescue Unfortunate? Why is all this long and cumbersome process?

– Vika…

She looks me in the eyes and I can see her through the Elvish image, under golden curly hair and pale aristocratic face, a usual and real one. My Vika. The one who doesn't need any explanations.

– Say "love", – says she.

I shake my head. I can't, I'm still there, in the cold whiteness of the mocking truth. Truth and love are incompatible.

– Say "love", – repeats Vika, – You can do it.

I make my choice.

– I love, – I whisper weakly.

– Friends and foes…

– Friends and foes… – I repeat.

– And I love you, – says Vika.

A wonderful city Lorien is, nobody laughs at the Human and the Elf that hug each other by the city gates.

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It's good to walk along the winter road if the whole army marched there before you. The snow is tread down well, it's impossible to get lost. Tokens of noisy, incoherent and fussy life can be seen everywhere.

A pine tree, with arrows poking out of it. Either a spy was suspected by the Elves or they just argued whose eyes are keener and whose hand is stronger. Most likely the latter.

The traces leading a bit to the side, two piles of tobacco ashes. One can just see two leaders stepped away to have a pipe while the army marches by. One of them was a wizard with a staff and the other – a warrior with a sword. Here are the traces: the round one of the staff and the narrow one of the sword sheath.

Here was a short stop, the snow is well tread to the left from the road and just lightly touched to the right. Oh sure, the Elves step so lightly that the snow holds them. So here two parts of the army were instructed by their leaders.

The five mile way would be long in the real world. Fortunately, role-players are not millionaires to spend months reaching their enemies. The road falls under our feet miraculously fast. Maybe role-players agreed to consider it an action of the spell…

We ascend to the cliffs and start circling along the path. Several times it seems to me that I recognize the place where I was scaring the hobbit but it always turns out that I'm wrong. The road was created in a hack-workers' way, assembled from repeating elements.

Finally Vika notices the tracks going into the fir grove from the road. Not well enough did we hide Unfortunate, any fighter lagging after the army would notice him. Without an agreement we walk faster, what if he's not here already?

But Unfortunate is there and even not alone. He sits leaning against the tree trunk and tells something to the hobbit, drinking from the flask. The hobbit, squatted against Unfortunate laughs effusively. Noticing us, he jumps up and grabs his little dagger.

Just look at him… this kid can be brave, at least when a helpless guy is behind his back.

– We're friends! – says Vika raising her hands. – We came with peace!

– I'm Elenium the Healer, – I support her. Will Unfortunate recognize us I wonder?

– Hi Lenia, – he says with a smile.

– I'm Harding! – informs us the hobbit hiding his dagger, – Haven't you seen Conan around? A tall guy with a fiery sword?

– That Conan have robbed the kid, – says Unfortunate very seriously, only his eyes are smiling.

– No, he's not that bad! – the hobbit defends his offender suddenly, – He then left all my supplies to Alien { *exactly this word is in the original, but in Russian transcription* }, he understood he needs them more!

– To whom? – me and Vika ask together.

– To Alien… – repeats the hobbit not suspecting anything, – To him. He broke his leg.

How interesting.

I approach Unfortunate and undo the cast on his leg, then shake out the contents of my bag to the snow. I don't have a slightest idea about how to heal in this imaginary world.

– So your name is Alien? – I ask. Unfortunate keeps silence.

I open one of the jars, the stinky green ointment is inside. I roll up the trouser-leg and spread it along Unfortunate's leg. After a little thinking I also stick several dry leaves on top of it and declare:

– The fracture will heal in five minutes.

The situation is absolutely simple. I'm able to heal the wounds in this world. Unfortunate appeared here with an injured limb. Now, when I opened my bag and spent some of its contents for Unfortunate, the computer that supports Lorien and its suburbs must restore the functioning of the drawn body.

– What if it doesn't work? – asks Harding curiously.

– Then we'll carry your… hm… friend to the city.

– Thanks, – says the hobbit sincerely, – I have only 3 strength points, I wouldn't be able to lift him.

He hesitates for a moment, then asks:

– Will you manage it alone?

– Sure.

– Then I'll run, okay? Back to the city… I was here for so long, will be punished for that.

Surely a kid.

– Okay… Run, – I say feeling conscience-stricken. Harding trots to the path, then shouts:

– But beware of Conan! Just in case…

Vika whispers in my ear:

– Conan the Victor over Hobbits!

– Cut this out, – I ask, – It's shameful enough already…

We wait for several minutes in silence, postponing the talk with Unfortunate. We need to wait for the healing results first.

– Okay, stand up, – commands Vika.

Unfortunate leans on the leg, unsure, rises a little, makes one step, another…

– Does it hurt? – I ask with curiosity of the real doctor.

He shakes his head.

– Then let's go to the city.

– And what's then? – Unfortunate squints his eyes at Vika, but she is silent, I have to reply:

– Then you'll have to make your choice after all. We don't have any more time for riddles.

One can't call the return to Lorien a triumphant one. The guards by the gates look at us disdainfully – we have left two hours ago and obviously didn't catch up with the army. There's no malicious phrases though, but I decide to explain anyway:

– He convinced us to train more, – I nod at Unfortunate, – Not too much use from us yet.

An explanation not worse than any other. Let them think of us as of newbies, too self assured in the beginning but repented in time.

– Is this Lorien? – asks Unfortunate while we drag ourselves along the snow-white trees tangled by stairs like Christmas trees with garlands.

– Exactly. Now we'll exit to the street and will finally fix our business. – I throw carelessly.

– I can't explain anything anyway, – says Unfortunate.

– Then we'll part. We'll part forever, man. – I don't lie and don't blackmail him. I need to hide, a long and boring task. To hide in small one-horse towns where calculators are called computers, and Vika needs to restore her business.

Vika looks at me askance but stays silent. She understands, she knew that I'll have to leave.

Unfortunate raises his head and looks into the sky pierced by mallorns.

– You can stay here if you want, you don't have to pay phone bills, do you? – I ask.

– No.

– … And neither have you to exit into reality to have a snack.

He remains silent.

– You'll earn a thousand points, will become cool and respected, – I reason aloud, – Some time I'll come here, will knock quietly and ask: "How can I find the wise Alien?". And maybe then you'll take a risk to tell me the truth.

– I don't have too much time either, Leonid.

– Oh come on! What does a couple of years mean to you… after hundreds of years … of silence?

Unfortunate stops, we gaze into each other's eyes.

– Hey guys, it looks like I became the less informed in our company suddenly. – says Vika.

– Everything is simple, Vika. Very simple. When you cast aside the impossible, then unbelievable becomes the truth.

Even Unfortunate is in disarray.

There's still something missing in that long chain of conditions that would allow him to talk.

– Let's go, – I ask, – Let's not confuse poor Elves… we'll never become a part of their tale.

The exit from Lorien is through the same gateway, only this time the gatekeeper doesn't bug us with his questions.

– Make your decision Unfortunate, – I say opening the door, – I'm not joking, I'm really tired of these riddles.

Only exiting into the street I understand that it'll be me to decide anyway.

Man Without Face stands five away meters or so, with hands crossed on his chest, gazing at us with the fog from beneath ash-colored hair, the black cloak spread above the dirty pavement. And he's not alone.

Three bodyguards stand behind his back, two more fly in the air a bit further. Their flight isn't made as ironically as Zuko's winged slippers – droning jet knapsacks are behind their backs. They are not high, just a couple of meters above the ground and the whole scene reminds me of some ancient, pre-virtual era game…

– Bravo, diver, – says Man Without Face.

Vika is the first one to come to herself.

– Were it your assholes who ruined my institution? – she starts aggressively.

The fog above the cloak's collar waves slightly.

– Check your account baby and then decide whether you have any right to feel hurt.

Another move – the nonexistent face turned towards me.

– The warehouse where we had our talk is located at 42 Nukem Street. Go and take what was promised to you.

How dashingly. A whip and a cookie. A very sweet cookie.

Man Without Face steps forward and stretches his hand towards Unfortunate.

– Let's go, we have a lot to discuss. I know who you are.

Unfortunate doesn't move.

– We can make a deal. We must make a deal. I don't know what conditions do you have, but everything can be decided… – whispers Man Without Face ingratiatingly. He doesn't look at us, we're bought and swept from the gameboard.

That's what he thinks of course.

– You haven't been to Russia for too long, Dima, – I say and Man Without Face freezes, – You can hang your medal above the toilet

bowl.

– You want to say your not for sale, Leonid?

We're even, he knows my name too, and maybe even my address as well.

– Yes.

– Don't go suicidal. I prefer to pay well for the job well done, and learned that not in Russia by the way.

– I didn't work for you. And you're risking as well.

– How comes, I wonder?

– What if I tell Urman about you? To Friedrich Urman himself? He is very anxious to join the mystery too.

Man Without Face laughs.

– Diver, you're just plain stupid! To Urman himself? None of the guys of his rank ever does business in virtuality personally. The aides exist for that: the secretaries, twins, facsimiles if you want, the very well trained aides… The ones intended for doing business in virtuality.

I hold the blow. The slap is good, I never suspected such subtleties. I thought that the businessmen should aspire into the Deep as passionately as any ordinary man. But I hold the blow, I don't have another choice.

– What's the difference, Dibenko? I can report you to Al-Kabar, but you can't do anything to me, I'm diver.

– Even divers have their weak spots.

He's bluffing, he must be bluffing. I turn to Unfortunate and ask:

– Do you want to go with him?

– It's for you to decide, – says Unfortunate. He's the only one now who doesn't have a single bit of fear. He, and also those Dibenko's gorillas, but in their case the reason for that is different.

– We're leaving, – I say and take Unfortunate's hand. As strange as it might seem, but I'm sure that Dibenko won't stop us. He's not an idiot, after all! If he just understands what's going on…

– Kill those two, – orders Man Without Face.

We're standing too close to each other and the guards don't shoot. Looks like they are ordered to keep Unfortunate safe no matter what. The couple in the air just continues to fly, but those three on the ground storm towards us.

Do unarmed people need much? Just several machine gun butt hits – several viruses thrust into our machines – and we'll disappear from the battlefield. Maybe the brave Elves of Lorien are now watching us through the blind wall, but they won't meddle, they have enough of their own bravery and battles.

But it turns out that not only the Elves are watching us.

I duck the first blow, trip the guard up and he falls. They have to

play according to the common rules in Deeptown… I'm trying to snatch out a machine gun from him in a weak hope that this virus set was created as an autonomous file object…

… A long grey shadow jumps down from the roof of the Elvish hut. The wolf knocks down one of the flying bodyguards and drops him on the pavement as easily as a cardboard puppet. One click of his jaws and the man stays motionless. The wolf jumps aside, and right in time: the second flyer starts shooting at him. Bullets pierce the indifferent body that starts to float up: the knapsack is still working. The wolf rushes to us.

Man Without Face steps out from his way in fluid motion but the wolf was not going after him, he bites into the throat of one of our opponents. The time seems to slow down, I see how the third bodyguard fights with Vika, and I throw my opponent on him.

The wolf bites through the bodyguard's neck in an instant and pounces on the remaining pair. The werewolf is too excited to imitate the pure wolf's behavior – he rips his enemies with teeth and batters them with paws in a cat-like manner. The greenish sparkling dust pours from his claws – the virus weapons have entered the battle.

The machine gun lies by my feet, I pick it up but the program has the user detector of course, the trigger is fixed under my finger. I just throw the weapon at the guard who flies towards us, and he starts to shoot reflectively – too fast and incoherent reaction, and also the dangerous one in this case. The volley hits the machine gun that rotates in the air and the battle program's security fails. An explosion – the whole virus package gathered in the machine gun image, works simultaneously. The poor flyer is the closest one to this bloody mess – and he gets it all. He flames up disintegrating into formless pieces right into the air.

– Run! – growls the wolf, jumping up from the motionless bodies, the bloody saliva drips from his fangs, the fur stands on its ends. I step towards Romka, pat him on the back and whisper – "thanks."

Man Without Face is the last one alive, he stands there quietly watching the demise of his guards.

– Run! – the Wolf growls again, not averting his glare from Dibenko.

– The Fellowship of divers? – says Man Without Face mockingly, – I never expected that.

He's too calm. I nod to Vika and Unfortunate and obediently they start retreating. Me and Roman stay – two against one. But this one is too unruffled.

– Again I suggest you to bethink yourself Leonid, – says Dibenko to me.

– Get out of here, will you?! – hisses the wolf glaring at me with

greenish human eyes and leaps on Man Without Face.

A nice leap, this time even quicker and more accurate than the previous one from the roof. The jaws click squeezing Dibenko's neck, forepaws scratch his chest. Now, standing on his hindpaws, the wolf is much higher than a human.

– You sucker, – says Man Without Face.

He lifts the wolf by the scruff with one hand and throws him back towards the Elvish hut. The blow is so hard that the wall gives way and the wolf almost flies into the corridor, but jumps back up immediately and leaps on Dibenko again. The blow wasn't just a blow – the wolf's hide flames with a pale glow. The virus was stuck in Romka after all. He must have turned all the security off for the sake of speed and accuracy. But even now, when the virus is mincing his computer, he still fights.

I run. Everything else is not important. Romka was watching me – just how did he manage? He lunged into this fight to give me the chance and it's stupid to lose it.

Vika stops Deep-Transit's cab ten meters further down the street, pushes Unfortunate inside and waves her hand to me. Then her face distorts in terror.

A disappearing howl of pain scratches my ears from behind and in the next moment Man Without Face grabs me by the shoulder. It's too hard to compete in speed with somebody who has 'octium"s prototype as a home computer. One blow – and I fall on the pavement. Man Without Face who invented the Deep, leans over me.

– I was patient, – he says.

I spit into the grey foggy mask, just a symbolic gesture – the ability to spit is not implemented into the virtual body. I'll have to make a hint for Computer Wiz…

Dibenko moves his hand along the face as if wiping the spit off, but in fact he's not that squeamish: his fingers scoop a handful of fog and form a sort of a snowball, looking as if made of a dirty city snow.

– Get it diver. Happy dreams to you.

Then the snowball flies towards my face, unwrapping into an endless cloth. It's not gray anymore – it's colorful, sparkling, reflecting, cheerful and pattern-covered. Too late I understand what does this colorfulness remind me.

Abyss-abyss…

Too late.

Deep-program covers me and there's no strength to duck it.

Abyss-abyss…

The cloth still burns and doesn't seem to fade as the honest lawful deep-program should…

Abyss-abyss…

I dive deeper and deeper, I fall into this colorful chasm, into the endless chain of false reflections, into the colorful labyrinth, into the madness and unconsciousness.

There's no timer on my machine and nobody will come to my door with the key.

Abyss-abyss…

I can't surface as fast as the colorful whirl pulls me down!

Abyss-abyss…

Composure first of all.

As I heard, it's a favorite saying of some of our cosmonauts, but just who remembers the heroes of the past days now?

Composure.

The panic kills faster than the bullet.

The endless kaleidoscope surrounds me: the rainbow, the fireworks, the working deep-program. How simple – and unexpected. The diver can surface but what would he do if the water comes in faster than he swims up?

I don't know yet.

I make a step and succeed as strange as it might seem. The world have lost its reality, turned into the mad abstract artist's painting. The swirling orange band flies by, curls into the ring, tries to tie around my head. I tear it off: I can't see my hands, but the band flies aside as if in hurt feelings. The small fountains of white dust rise from under my invisible feet, an emerald rain starts falling, each drop is a tiny crystal, painfully stinging the body.

And the silence, a dead silence, almost the one Unfortunate was talking about…

Be calm.

Where am I now? Walk along Deeptown's streets with outstretched hands and looking forward blindly? Or fell down somewhere into the depth of Dibenko's computer? Or maybe I'm spread throughout the whole Net like some mythical character?

Be calm.

First of all, I'm at home. I'm at home, before my old computer, in the helmet and the suit. The keyboard is somewhere before me, the mouse to the right. If to grope the keys and to enter the exit command manually…

No, it's impossible, and not just because I won't feel the keys beneath my fingers. My consciousness got used to just imitate the movements long time ago: I don't stretch my hand, but just jerk it weakly, I don't jump but just raise from the chair a little, not walk but move my feet under the table. Illusions. The Deep.

– Vika! – I say, – Vika! Exit from virtuality! Vika, I cancel immersion! Exit!

No effect.

I took the possibility to communicate with Windows-Home from the Deep for granted, to download and to transfer files, to exit the Deep, to inquire about the machine resources. If it were so simple… there wouldn't be any need for divers. Now, in the common virtual

dweller's hide I'm in the common rights.

I can't feel the real world.

I can't cry for help.

I'm drowning.

Be calm!

I try to take off the helmet that I can't feel. Useless. I run, pull away hoping to tear the wires. Hardly have I moved even a bit.

I close my eyes. I need to switch off from the deep-program, not to see it, not to dive deeper.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours, let me go…

I repeat this hundreds of times – the poor pupil in the diver's school, dolefully writing the same sentence in the notebook over and over again.

Abyss-abyss, I'm not yours, let me go…

Nothing changes.

There, in the infinitely far real world, my motionless body sits by the computer and the deadly rainbows reflect in my opened eyes.

Dibenko have got me.

Did he invent this trap accidentally, trying to learn how to surface, to invent the life-buoy but actually invented the cement bowl attached to the feet instead? Or was it exactly what he wanted to do: not to pull all virtuality dwellers to the divers' level but to descend us to the common one?

Maybe I'll never know that.

What happened to Romka? Did Vika have time to jump into the car or is she wandering in the colorful snowstorm too while Unfortunate walks away with Dibenko, silent and submissive?

I need to return to find out.

The world around calms down a bit. Either the color storm gained some system or I got accustomed to my surroundings. Let's assume that the emerald rain falls from above, so I now have one reference point. Let's try to walk… slowly, easily… to that stubborn orange band for instance that is still fidgeting there before me.

The band lets me to come close, then flies away. I have time to notice that the emerald rain tattered its edges. The orange band is curled into the Moebius ring, as if it's… it's independent from the space that surrounds it!

Looks a bit too intricate for the deep-program…

I move towards the band again – and again it doesn't let me touch it and flies away.

What's going on anyway? Have this mad world formed around me or is it just a trick of my own subconsciousness?

I follow the band, any direction can be correct – if directions exist here at all. The rain thickens, the crystals become thinner turning into

needles. I lower my head to protect the eyes and keep walking. I like what's going on for some reason: somebody fights with somebody.

It means I have a chance.

Neither distance nor time here, all measures are merged. Maybe one hour have passed, maybe three kilometers.

Maybe the madness have come.

The band soars ahead but its movements are slower and less sure. It's just an orange rag now, tattered by the rain. The last leap – and it falls down raising the geyser of white dust.

Is it over?

I stand over remains of my strange guide. What now? No more guiding line. I close my eyes – and hear a weak distant sound. Deep program doesn't work with sounds! They say, or maybe these are just rumors, that Dima Dibenko's computer didn't have a sound card.

I keep walking.

The sound becomes louder but not clearer. The forest stream can babble like this, or the distant surf, or the candle flame. Whatever, even if it's an echo of the Big Bang! I need this sound, this lack of silence!

One step, another.

Even through the closed eyelids I can feel that something have changed.

I open my eyes. The world's colors seem to be faded. The emerald rain have lost its brightness, became pale: not gems but dirty bottle glass is pouring down from the sky. The white dust under my feet is barely seen.

And the blue star is shining ahead. A splinter of the blue sky.

Either it became bigger or I grew smaller, but the sparkling blue sphere is right above me now. I stretch my hands touching warm rays, and fall into the star.

The wind.

The cold wind blows into my face.

I rose from the snow-covered ground. Wherever I look – the plain, flat as a table, no horizon can be seen. The sky is covered with orange tangling threads, a blue light streams through them. And also – foggy jets flowing above the ground, changing brightness and density, flying against the wind and soaring up to the orange mesh of the sky.

I shook the snow from my knees and looked at my hand. A strange snow – crystals are too big, friable and not sticking together. They hiss on my hand and fly away in a light smoke.

– I'm glad you came Lenia, – says Unfortunate from behind.

I didn't have time to turn around, he almost shouted:

– No… don't!

The plain enveloped in fog, the cold wind, the crumbly snow… I

swallowed the lump that stuck in my throat:

– Unfortunate… thank you.

– I had to help, – he replied very seriously, – At least to try. You rescued me after all.

– Not very successfully…

– But you've led me out. I felt bad there…

– I can guess that. But you could pass "Labyrinth" in an hour… in 10 minutes.

– Lenia…

– You could just exit, or could beat all the records.

– No, I couldn't.

– But why?

– Haven't you understood yet? – surprise showed in his voice.

– You didn't want to kill?

– Yes.

– But all that wasn't for real!

– For you.

– I won't ever be able to be like you.

– But this isn't necessary at all, Gunslinger.

– You know, – I said fighting the temptation to turn around, – Once, for just a second it seemed to me… only for a second… that you're Messiah. Do you understand?

Unfortunate is very serious.

– No Leonid. I wouldn't like to be your God. Neither of those that you created. They are too cruel.

– Just as we are.

– Just as you are, – echoed Unfortunate with sadness in his voice.

– Is it a dream? – I asked after a while, – Everything I see around?

He was silent for very long, the one behind my back who asked me not to turn around.

– No Lenia. Even if it is, it's not yours.

I understood.

– Thank you.

I wasn't cold, maybe because he wanted so. The gray grained snow didn't burn me, and neither did foggy jets. Maybe it was easy for him, maybe required an enormous effort? I don't know.

– Did you have time to escape? – I asked.

– Yes. We're driving through the city now. Vika gives one address after another to the driver… Looks like she doesn't know what to do.

Unfortunate paused for a moment, then added:

– And she's crying also.

Orange bands whirl in the sky, an eternal dance below the hot blue sun. Maybe it's beautiful after all…

– Tell her I'm alright.

– Is it true?

– I don't know. Will you help me to get out of here?

Unfortunate didn't answer.

– Will I be able to get out?

– Yes. Probably.

– Tell Vika that everything is alright.

– She won't believe me.

– She will. She have almost understood too. Tell her that there's a "Polyana" company in the Russian district of Deeptown. It owns just a single house, a kind of dull concrete 12– story building. Wait for me there, by the second doorway, in exactly one hour.

– Anything else, Leonid?

– No. That's all.

– It'll be very hard, Gunslinger. – Unfortunate stammers, – You're accustomed to fight the Deep. The force and the push. You're a good swimmer, you always managed to surface from the whirlpool. But now it won't work.

– Aren't you accustomed to rely on the force?

– Depending on what force, Gunslinger…

Something touched my shoulder lightly, either in parting or to reassure.

And then the orange threaded sky fell on the snow covered ground…

I rise – in droplets of colors, in kaleidoscope of sparks. The deep program works. I still can't see my body.

Only a faint memory of the touch lives in me.

I still remember that world, I'm still living there, in an alien distant dream…

– What the hell are you doing, Dibenko? – I whisper into the crazy silence. – We can't… we can't treat him our way.

He can't hear me, the accidental creator of the virtual world, he continues his pursuit after Unfortunate, a hunt for the miracle but I must find him to explain how wrong he is…

I close my eyes and stretch my hands to the sides. Colorful flashes behind closed eyelids – the deep program continues to envelope my brains.

First of all – be calm. There's nothing demonic in it, it's a sparkling trinket, the one that hypnotizers rotated before their patients' eyes – that's what the deep program is. A trinket of the electronic age. There's no border between the dream and the dream within the dream. It's me who builds these barriers, who convinces himself that he's drowning.

But now – it's time to surface.

– Abyss… – I whisper almost tenderly, – Abyss-abyss…

We were building it, placing bricks of computers on the cement of phone lines. We raised a huge city. The city that has neither good nor bad in it – not until we come.

It was hard for us in the present. There, where the passion of many days of somebody's program cracking and of many months of writing our own is not understood. There, where they talk not about falling prices for a Meg of RAM, but about rising prices for bread. In the world where the killings are real. In the world where it's so hard for the sinners and the saints and the common people alike.

We built our own city that doesn't know borders, we believed in it's being real.

Time to surface.

We wanted miracles and we inhabited Deeptown with them. The Elvish glades and Martian deserts, labyrinths and cathedrals, far-away stars and sea depths, a place was found for everything.

But now – it's time to surface.

We got tired to believe in kindness and love, we wrote the word 'freedom' on our banner believing in our naivety that the freedom is superior to love.

Time to grow up.

– Let me go, abyss, – I ask, – Abyss-abyss… I'm yours.

Part 5. Unfortunate

0

In the beginning – it is dark.

All the colors of the world have gone in an instant.

I didn't notice when and how it happened. The deep program just was here, but now there's nothing at all.

Maybe this is how divers die, falling to the very bottom of the virtual space, burning down their brains and not perceiving anything anymore?

But the darkness fractions into the mesh of tiny squares, changes brightness and colors return.

I'm standing with my forehead pressed against the wall, the drawn wall of the drawn house.

Weird. Looks like I've entered the virtual space without turning the deep program on at all, but I'm not just looking on the helmet's screens, I'm kinda really here! It's just the world isn't real anymore, it became drawn and cartoon-like.

I step back from the wall, squares merge turning into brown rectangles: bricks. I look at the sky – dark bluishness with sparse stars. Houses and palaces are lined along the street, looking like kids' drawings: sharp contours filled with colors. This little house is the brick one, this fence is wooden, fur trees in the garden… Steel tubes with yellow patches on their spikes are stuck along the street – lampposts… Fake, just a fake. More decent parts of the city are drawn better but I'm somewhere in the suburbs now, the world around was created with simple programs and is maintained by weak servers.

But the funniest thing is that I'm quite real myself! The shirt sleeve torn in the fight, scratched hands… I raise my hand closer to the eyes and can see every hair, a dirt under nails and the skin bruised against fingerbones.

A real human in the cartoon.

I start to shiver. This is something new, it never happened before. What did the deep program do to me, been run a thousand times? What did I do to it when surfaced from insanity?

The sound flows closer from behind. I turn around and see the bus moving along the street: a huge two storey rattletrap, made of glass almost completely. The bus is drawn pretty thoroughly, even its wheels are rotating. Caricature faces are glued to the windows: kids, adults, elders. The Deep-Transit's emblem is on the bus' side.

I just stand, gasping for air, looking at the motionless faces. Well, why would they be different – mimicry can be expressed only by very good, tuned programs, aimed for the single user. These are just tourists.

The bus stops, the people exit it awkwardly, an elegant gentleman dressed in bright– red overalls is in front: the guide. All men are dressed absolutely the same in suits with ties, just a single black guy in the group is in jeans and t-shirt. All faces are indifferently well–shaped, like a second line villains' in kids' cartoon series. The women are all in luxurious dresses, much better worked out than their faces, wearing jewelry. Also a flock of kids with cartoony big eyes and a group of elder men and women dressed in blinkers and with cameras. The guy in the wheelchair is the last to exit the bus with the help of others.

– Hi! – shouts the guide to me and waves his hand. His mouth opens but no mimicry can be seen either.

– Hello… – I force out a smile and the satisfied Deep-Transit employee turns to his wards:

– What attracts you most… { *In English in the original* } I hear a slight hissing and the guide's voice becomes barely heard. A dry, vaguely familiar voice drowns it:

– What you interests most in this district Deeptown? We can see good known… – a pause, – famous, renowned center of book selling, where they will offer to your attention any literature… – a pause, – any books, magazines, newspapers, paper media published since…

I blink as a kid who ripped open his beloved teddy bear to find soiled rags, crumpled paper and somebody's dirty sock inside. Gee, and I valued Windows-Home's interpreter program so high! I was amazed how fast and correctly does it translate from any of the five official Deeptown's languages!

Yeah, fast is true, but all correctness is ensured by our own brains only, as it picks adequate words from the mess.

– Also there are, located, known, popular restaurants "Arthur's Sword" and "Four– Ten". If we walk on forty-three street hundred meters or bit more, then we will come to place of entertainment for grown-ups, adults.

A slight noise in the tourists' crowd, one should assume that they smiled.

– You have two hours of free time, – declares the guide.

I think I know where am I. That faceless gray dome nearby is "famous, renowned" book center named after some American president. If I'm on the 43rd street, then I'm on the opposite side of the city. What a walk! I look at the watch, scared, and the panic fades, we left the Elvish realm only 20 minutes ago!

The tourists wander away: the couples to restaurants, singles – to adults' entertainment places mostly. The guy in the wheelchair together with the grey-haired lady and the black guy rolls away towards the book center. The guide gets the cigar of a considerable

size, definitely not the cheapest one, drawn better than his face, bites off its end and lights it, then moves towards me.

Will it be always like this now?

Is this a kind of victory over the Deep that I wanted?

No.

I'd rather be deceived further, seeing the city and the people instead of the mixture of kid's drawing and the primitive cartoon. I'm not a judge for this world, and neither am I an indifferent watcher from aside. I'm a part of the Deep, flesh of Deeptown's flesh…

I hide my face in my hands, looking into the darkness, I don't know whom I should ask, the Deep or myself, but I ask anyway.

Be myself, Abyss…

– Have a cigar, fellow, – says the guide friendly. He smiles, opening a cigar case for me. The collar of the red overalls is unbuttoned, the pen cap and the notebook stick out from the pocket. I can bet they weren't there before. His face is open, kind and attractive, just as it must be for a guy who shows the Deep to inexperienced newbies.

– Thanks, I don't smoke…

Everything is normal, just as before. Even better.

I'm yours, Abyss, I can be the real human in the real Deeptown or the real one in cartoony city. Maybe I even can be the drawing walking among real inhabitants.

Thanks, dear Dima Dibenko. You wanted to throw me out of the game or maybe even to kill me, but something have gone wrong. I even can guess what exactly. Unfortunate have helped me after all, he gave me part of the strength that he has. So my sincere thanks go to him.

– Ah well, as you wish, – the guide doesn't feel hurt by my rejection and hides the cigar case into his pocket. – You're an old timer here, right?

– Right, – I confess.

– I'm Kirk, – the man introduces himself, – Don't I really look like him?

He probably means some play's or folklore character? I never was inquisitive about the simple American mass-culture.

– Not really, – I answer randomly.

– And this is right! – Kirk supports me, – The resemblance must be in your heart!

He releases a jet of smoke into the sky and skillfully rolls the cigar from one corner of his mouth to another.

– I'm from Seattle, – he decides to go on with the talk even if I didn't introduce myself in return.

– And I'm from St. Petersburg.

Kirk taps my shoulder cheerfully:

– Yeah! I know, been there!

I'm pleasantly surprised but his next words disappoint me:

– Nice town, – shares Kirk his impressions, – I had a girlfriend once… such a severe girl! And you know, it so happened, the carburetor went down right when we were passing St. Petersburg one evening. So we had to stop for a night.

He winks to me slyly.

It'd be great to visit Tom Sawyer's native town, but now this self-importance pisses me off.

– I'm from the different St. Petersburg, the one in Russia.

– Russia! – Kirk is pleasantly surprised, – There's St. Petersburg too?

– Yup. And Seattle – where is it? In Canada or Mexico? – I inquire.

Kirk chews his cigar unable to understand whether I'm kidding or really don't know such an outstanding city.

– It's in America!

– Which one, South or Latin?

No, even if he's a typical and real American, he's a nice guy nevertheless, he laughs and slightly pushes me on the stomach.

– Great! Cool! I'll visit you, later. I'm planning to visit Europe when I'm 45, will go see your city too!

– Sure. You're welcome to.

I'm so exhausted by the deep program that stand here and eagerly support this ridiculous talk.

– I'm giving a ride around to the tourists, – Kirk goes on, – father's business. It's great! Today we were going through the city, one girl kept asking to show her the diver. I pointed at one guy outside, said, "Diver!". They almost overturned the bus when all of them rushed to that side to look.

We laugh together.

– We seldom come here, – Kirk smooches his cigar, – But Sam kept asking to show him the book center, se we decided to stop here… not too far for him to go, and also restaurants are close… and stuff… Sam is the one in jeans and t-shirt…

– Huh? That black one?

Kirk chokes on his cigar from such an outrageous racism. How dare one to call the black one – black!

– Well, I have to go, business… – he mumbles and quickly moves to the bus without saying goodbye. I just shrug. Oh citizens of the mighty country, if you just could realize how ridiculous and stupid your complexes are!

But it's time for me to go too. I raise my hand and the cab readily

appears from around the corner.

– Deep-Transit welcomes you! – says the driver. As if purposefully he's black and I laugh quietly, getting into the car.

1

The drive takes quite long, Deep-Transit connects to "Polyana" company through quite a bunch of intermediate hosts. My computer is not powerful enough to support appropriately the whole house where I rent an apartment from myself, so "Polyana" is hosted by someone's rental server, somewhere in Byelorussia I suppose. It's not too expensive and I ain't gonna change this order even when I buy a real machine instead of my current Pentium.

On my way I have fun making the world around drawn and real in turns. Now I succeed in this without effort. Even more – I can change the space perception in fragments. A drawn car passes our real one. A real girl walks along the drawn street. Two guys stand chatting: one is real, another one – cartoony.

Even if it's insanity, I really like it.

I make the Volvo I'm riding in drawn and pull my hand through the window. A slight pressure on my skin – and the hand feels the wind outside.

Fantastic!

The world around belongs to foreign servers, I'm just passing here, maybe it's even impossible to get here by an ordinary means… while at any moment I can exit, fall from the speeding car. Something have shifted, messed up. I don't dive into the Deep anymore, I really live in here!

In a block from my house I ask the driver to stop. I know this neighborhood very well, it belongs to the couple of big Russian banks, not officially of course. Financiers don't see any real use of such 'investments', but the programmers working for the banks had set a dwelling here on their companies' expense. What boss from 'New Russians' would ever find out that his computers don't only make debit to meet credit, but also support a part of Deeptown's territory?

It's the best place to test the newly acquired abilities.

Lots of people hovers about here: it's the downtown, both living quarters and entertainment centers are pretty close. I walk along the street looking for more or less quiet corner.

This one looks okay: a tiny park with small fountain and a couple of benches, attached to a blind wall of the highrise, made simply but with taste. Ignoring the sign "No dogs allowed!", a red haired girl walks on the grass with a kitten in the lead. Hm, well, pretty logical – the ban is not for them. The kitten is obviously pissed by the nasty lead, he stops from time to time and tries to tear it off with a paw. I smile in return to the strict girl's look and make her drawn in a moment effort. The kitten stays real, he's sunny-red, just as his

mistress, quick and fidgety.

Virtual pets is one of the most profitable businesses in Deeptown, the second after computer games of course. The Japanese love to keep those – maybe because it's impossible to keep the real ones in their pencil-box apartments? Also those pets are being bought by those poor ones who love cats and dogs but suffer from allergies…

I sit on the bench, by the couple that softly whispers to each other, examine the blind wall listening to the purling of water in the fountain. If I'm not mistaken, there are computers of a very well known bank behind it. Should I give it a try?

Ah, what the hell, I'm already charged for millions in damages, one wouldn't be sorry about the hair when his head is taken off…

Calming myself with the splinters from the people's wisdom treasury, I still can't make up my mind. The couple is nuzzling not paying any attention to me. I hope they are lovers divided by thousands of kilometers, not just seekers of safe adventures.

The kids run back and forth along the wall: a girl and two boys, holding color chalks in their hands and excitedly covering the wall with graffiti. I can hear cheerful shouts: "Hey Janka, Andryushka's monster was scarier!" … "Sevka, come on, give me the red chalk, will you?". Looks like somebody have brought their offspring for a virtual walk. Finally the kids calm down and start drawing. The girl draws the samurai with a sword, the sword is almost real. Chubby glasses bearer Seva runs along the wall picturing something like a snake that swallowed an elephant. But the snake gets a barrel and I understand that it's just a tank. Skinny and swarthy Andrei diligently wheezes drawing an impossible monster. Maybe intentionally, maybe he wanted to draw a man…

I stand up and pad towards the kids.

– Hey guys, could you draw a door? – I ask all three.

The question have definitely puzzled them, but after a short debate they start working on the requested together. The door is being drawn with excitement, mutual taking of chalks away and arguments about whether they should draw a keyhole. I wait patiently. Finally the drawing is finished and the young talents look at me with demand: will I appreciate their work or not?

– Cool, – I say honestly, – Thanks a lot!

The door looks in fact good. It is drawn right between the elephant's trunk… errr… the tank's barrel and the samurai's sword. It has a keyhole, and a handle, and even hinges.

– You have really helped me out! – I confess.

The kids wait stubbornly.

Then I make the street around drawn, make a deep breath, relax and turn the door into the real one.

It's just an illusion, not more than an illusion of course…

I stretch my hand and pull the door towards me, once and again.

No effect. What was I expecting after all?

In anger, I kick the real door in the drawn wall and it sweeps open.

It opens to the inside… Wow, it worked!

The kids scream from behind, not scared or surprised but cheered mostly. Followed by these screams I enter the impenetrable wall.

And get into the bathhouse.

The ancient Romans who were real experts in this, along with the thrifty Finnish and heated Russians would burst with envy: it's a huge marble hall, the glass dome above is slightly covered with snow, cold winter sun beaming through it. A round pool is in the center of the hall, a dozen of men cools down in it. The mountains and a steep slope can be seen through the windows, several more guys, the boldest ones run down the slope raising fountains of snow dust. The heavy wooden door swings open and a skinny guy runs out of the sweating-room with a scream, dives into the pool and starts jumping on one place raising waves. The bald fat man wrapped in the sheet drinks beer by the bar, glancing at the pool with condescension.

The urge to drop the pants and join the company is big: what a guys these bank programmers are, what a cool ones! They had set themselves quite well… I just wonder, don't they get wet in sweat in reality while polishing themselves in the sweating-room with birch besoms?

And gosh, I've really entered!

The columns around the pool still cover myself from the others' looks, but it won't be for too long. The dressed guy in the bathhouse is a weird sight. I turn around – the door is gone.

Ah well, I don't care.

I enter the wall. The bathhouse is good but I'm interested in something else. Something that doesn't have any analogies in virtuality at all…

But it looks I've got into the wrong place again: a gloomy desolate quarters, a row of tanks is in the center of it, the water noisily splashes in them. Along the row a conveyor band is crawling, something looking like detergent powder spills into the tanks from the holes in the ceiling. All this looks like some terrible automated laundry from an old sci-fi novel. I'm about to move further when one tank turns over and spills its contents on the conveyor band.

Lots of dirty water and a couple of kilograms of money.

I'm so shocked that jump out of virtuality even without reciting my usual rhyme.

The numbers were on the helmet's screens, accurate columns of

numbers, tables, vague phrases. I took the helmet off. Sure, why would anyone graphically picture the process of money transfer or, even more, their laundering? But my smart subconsciousness being used to the pictures, did it's best!

The head was aching badly. Was at a result of a multiple-time deep program? Or just a consequence of that overstrain that I experience now? What's the difference?

I took an open pack of Analgin from the table, looked into the fridge. One can of Cola was still there. Choking, I chewed the tablets, washed it down with soda. Bear with it just a little more my poor organism, the main part is still ahead. Before returning to the laundry I glanced to the watch: a quarter before two. I should munch on something…

Blades hollowly bang in tanks, laundering money. Dollars, Deutsche marks and roubles crawl along the belt conveyor, I watch this endless flow that has either someone's sweat or blood behind it. What happens if I take a couple of millions from there? For some reason I'm sure they will appear on my account. Maybe I'll plug to the isolated bank network and will type in the order for money transfer, even not knowing about that. Maybe the bank's computers will do all operations themselves, submitting to my will only.

I'm not just a thief resistant to the deep's hypnosis anymore, I'm the deep itself, a part of it…

I lean over and pick up a 100 dollar note. It is even possible to remember it's serial number. It's possible to do so that it never appeared here at all according to the bank's documents.

Everything is possible now – or almost everything.

I throw the piece of paper back on the conveyor belt and pad to the wall. One step – and the world fades, falls down, turns into the flat scheme under my feet. A huge sheet rolled out into the void, I soar above, looking at the threads of the streets.

Here's my house.

I dive down to it, pierce the plane of the scheme, feel asphalt beneath my feet. No more efforts, no more rhymes and begs to the deep. I don't ask my body to breathe after all, do I?

Vika and Unfortunate stand by the entrance, talking. Then Vika notices me and silences in confusion. I wave my hand, walk towards them and Vika runs to meet me.

10

I shut the door of the entrance and mingle with the lock for some time. Vika still holds my hand, and it's quite difficult to start security systems using one hand only. Finally I just order the door to shut. The lock clicks and the light of the alarm system starts blinking. Unfortunate raises his head – looks like he felt something.

– What did he do to you? – asks Vika. Only now, when we're isolated from the outer world she relaxes a little. Probably I wasn't right not hurrying to her at once.

– The deep program, – I find the simple reason, explaining to her what happened. – The cycling deep program, the endless dive.

Vika frowns, she understands.

– It was impossible to surface.

– But you…

– … Found a detour, – I say glancing at Unfortunate askance. – Vika, how did it look like from aside?

– Dibenko threw something at you… – she knits her brow, remembering,

– Like a handkerchief of some kind… and you fell into it. It looked like a very powerful virus.

– What about Romka?

Vika looks at me in surprise.

– The wolf. It's Romka, the werewolf diver, my friend.

– He burned him, down to ashes. He just grabbed his throat and he blazed up.

I stay silent, what can I say? Visual effects of the virus might be different, the most important thing is how did it influence Romka's machine. I was always thinking he has a weak computer, like mine, maybe even without magnetooptics. If Man Without Face had used a brute-force weapon, Romka will have to reinstall all soft from scratch.

– Lenia…

I nod. It's not the time to express sympathy about others' troubles.

It's never enough time for that though…

– Let's go, – I nod to her and Unfortunate. – I live on 11th floor.

– Who else lives here?

– Nobody. Now – nobody. – I say squeezing into the elevator cabin. I push the button, a jerk and we crawl up. Vika frowns, she really fears heights… even of this type.

– Did anyone live here before?

– Well… in some sense, – I evade her question. The doors open and we exit to the stairs. Unfortunate looks around curiously.

– Here's my palace… welcome… – I say unlocking the apartment,

then add for Unfortunate only, – Returning the visit?

He nods.

Vika enters first, she delays by the threshold as if thinking whether she should take off her shoes or not. Sure not and she understands that. { *When entering an apartment, Russians usually leave shoes worn outside by the entrance. Special slippers are used inside apartments.* }

– The bathroom-toilet and the kitchen are to the right. The room and the balcony are to the left. – I inform politely.

Vika looks into the room carefully, her look slides across the faded wallpaper, stops for a second on the computer table, sofa, fridge and dresser. She's possibly disappointed. Sure!

– It's strange… – says Vika and I feel that she exits the deep for a second and looks at my living place from reality.

Go ahead… I just don't want to be in your sight at this moment.

– Let's go, – I pull Unfortunate's hand. – Want me to teach you how to brew coffee?

Unfortunate walks into the kitchen instead of an answer, quickly chooses the most expensive and at the same time the best coffee from the number of packages, takes the biggest coffee pot and the salt dispenser.

– A-ha, – I just say.

– Hundreds of servers have cooking recipes, – notes Unfortunate, – A girl from Rostov have added one more 5 minutes ago, quite interesting one. Should we risk to try it?

It would be strange to hope that I can teach him anything. Except maybe the ability to shoot at people.

But I doubt this is an ability he'd appreciate.

– Be at home, – I just answer returning to the room. Vika sits on the sofa examining the bookshelf.

– I'm back, – I inform her and Vika closes her eyes, just for a moment, to return into the deep.

– It's strange, – she repeats. – Lenia, for some reason I've been expecting…

– … To see the palace?

– No, not necessarily the palace, but at least something…

– Something like your hut?

She nods silently. I can quite understand her confusion: she was definitely sure I'm a spatial designer. But she saw a pathetic apartment instead, even if well drawn but definitely not deserving an honor to be immortalized in virtuality.

– Follow me, – I say, – Unfortunate, we'll leave for a minute! If something happens, we're in the stairwell somewhere.

Vika follows me obediently. It's clean and quiet in the stairs. I put

my finger to my lips:

– Hush… Don't disturb anyone…

– But you've said there's nobody else in the house… – whispers Vika.

– But what if not? – I answer mysteriously, pad to the door opposite to mine and take a piece of bent wire from my pocket. It's just like I imagine a picklock. Vika waits, already intrigued.

I pick at the wire in the lock and of course it opens. Sure, it was planned this way… Then we enter.

It's a big three room apartment { *'two bedroom' according to American standards* }. Some clothes – jackets and cloaks hang on hooks by the door. A kid's bicycle is leaned against the wall. Footwear is scattered along the wall. I give slippers to Vika, change myself and say:

– It's a habit to change footwear inside here. The family is big, four kids, they would take too much dirt from outside… and the floors are cold. { *Floors are almost never carpeted in Russia, they are either painted wood or vinyl covered. Some rugs and carpets are common but these never cover the floor completely.* } Vika stays silent, she have accepted the rules of the game.

We look into the kitchen – an old Polish kitchen furniture is there, yet from the Soviet times, lots of spices' jars, some sorts of pickled veggies and jams in big cans. The pot with hot borsch is on the stove top together with a pan of meat rissoles. A quiet green street can be seen outside the window and Vika glues to it instantly. Kids shout outside on the playground, a woman walks with an old slow poodle just by the doorway.

– Who lives here? – asks Vika.

– I know only their names – Viktor Pavlovich and Anna Petrovna. Their older daughter Lida finishes high school, and they also have three boys: Oleg, Kostya, Igor'.

After some hesitation I add:

– The poodle is named Gerda. In general I don't like when pets are named by human names, but they wanted so.

– What city is this?

– Vitebsk. I think it's Vitebsk.

Vika turns her back to me and says strictly:

– Don't come into my view.

For a minute or so she examines the kitchen after exiting virtuality. Then, having dived back, she turns to me and asks:

– Is it everywhere like this?

I nod.

– Masters are absent but their apartments live, – whispers Vika, – A shirt on the back of the chair, toys scattered on the floor, a leaking

faucet and trash swept under the sofa by the single… Right?

I keep silence.

– Len'ka, are you normal at all? – asks Vika quietly, – I was building mountains where is no people, where shouldn't be any people… it's strange too maybe. I just don't like people too much.

– Don't lie, – I ask her.

– … And you have built the house in which nobody will ever live… No, the house which is *almost* inhabited: a smoking pipe in the ashtray and the hot teapot on the stove… Modular 'Maria Celesta' { *kitchen furniture* }. Lenia, what for?

– I didn't have right to lodge them really, to think out characters and faces, griefs and joys. Let it be like this… the things only. They also can tell a lot.

I still think she doesn't understand, can't understand completely and I say hurriedly:

– A guy lives one floor below, a music lover. He's from Podol'sk. Sometimes he's too carried away and cranks his tape player so loud that it's necessary to knock into his wall. But he's a nice guy, he makes the volume lower at once. He has a great collection, cassettes, vinyl, CDs, a little of everything. Vinyl mostly, it costs peanuts now, nobody needs it, and he has a Vega turntable, an old one but it works fine. On the sixth floor a weird type lives, I think he's an engineer, works on a plant in Tula, they were making weapons before, now – some consumer trinkets. He dreams of writing 'love mysteries', he invented this sort of a genre… So he writes them, types on a typewriter in the evenings, but never shows to anybody. He understands himself that it comes out bad, he's a rare type of 'graphomaniac', a harmless one. I took his writings sometimes, looked through, it's really rubbish, but so kind and naive one, he should have been born in the XVIIIth century…

Vika doesn't reply and I go on, understanding already that I've made a mistake, I shouldn't have shown her this empty apartment, and even less – to tell her about others, she won't ever understand this weird stuff, these ravings that I was building for two years…

– There's an old woman on the third floor, she lives alone in three room apartment, her life is hard, I know… especially because she's from somewhere in Ukraine, from Kharkov, I suppose. She turns the TV on only when the soap opera is being shown, and even then she keeps the brightness down thinking that less power is being consumed this way and the tube doesn't wear off… But she fears to sublet the rooms or to change her apartment, maybe this is right… I seldom visit her, I can't help her anyway, and it's dreadful to see how she is living. Especially before the holidays, you know, the most terrible-looking poverty is the one that tries to celebrate the New Year. Her children

have forgotten her, or maybe she never had them or they were killed in wars, she has a picture on the wall – a guy in the Russian military uniform…

Vika keeps silence.

– There's a couple on the second floor, they are funny. Married for just a year, from Ufa. They quarrel all the time, then make peace, sometimes one can hear them from the staircase… sometimes the cup gets shattered, sometimes they shut the door with such force that plaster falls down. But anyway it seems to me that they'll never divorce, something keeps them together, either some secret or love or both; love is a great secret too, you know… And the three room apartment there is empty… just empty. The Jewish family lived here, then they left, selling the apartment to some mediator company which still can't get rid of it… probably they've boosted the price too much, the apartment is in Moscow, in a good district…

I'll suffocate in this silence, in her not saying a word.

– The disabled old man lives on the first floor, he moves with crutches, possibly the most noisy and caustic person in whole Kursk. He brawls in shops, quarrels with neighbors, I always pass the first floor as fast as I can, fearing to run into him, but it's not right, it's not his fault that he became what he is, it's life… Life.

I can understand myself how ridiculous does this word sound here.

Life? What life – in the drawn apartments of the drawn house, in these concrete crypts where only things remember people. Only neutron bomb would appreciate this, not an alive woman.

I'm really an idiot, a clinical case. Ah well, still for good: Vika can start working on her new thesis.

– Len'ka, – says she, – My God, Len'ka, what happened to you?

Oh yeah, here comes…

– Forgive me, – she says, – All my screams… about the work with psychos… about all those assholes… if I was hit like you…

– Vika… – I can't understand a thing anymore.

– Somebody deserted you, betrayed you? You lost the ideals you wanted to believe in? And you gave up? – she asks quietly, – You don't believe that you can help somebody, to do a bit of good? And you ran away here, into the deep, into the fairy tale? You really can love but you fear your love?

– I can help – here. Here only. At least by dragging the ones who got lost out of this drawn world. But you know, one drowns not when he can't swim, one drowns when there's no more strength to stay on the shore. And the shore… it's not in my power anymore.

– You don't see any hope at all there, in reality?

– I do – now. Now Unfortunate have appeared.

– Lenia, you hide something! Do you know who is he?

– Yes I do, and it means that there's a hope. If they could became as they are, then we'll be able too.

– But who are – "they"?!

How can I explain? How to make her believe in impossible, in something for which the tabloid pages is the best place?

– Vika, he almost said that there… back in the Elvish city. Their servers don't support English, this is the purely Russian party. He called himself an Alien.

Vika shakes her head, she understood, but she doesn't want to, she can't believe.

– He's an alien, Vika. He's not from the Earth.

– He's a human…

– In some sense – yes. Much more human than we all are. Better than we are, and maybe even the one that we'll never be able to become.

– Lenia, why do you think so?

– He doesn't even have the body – here. Yes he flew, by the most usual and boring way, from one star to another. Do you remember his words about the Silence?

Vika shivers.

– It's dreadful to imagine for us but he had passed all this. Hundreds, thousands of years, the void and silence, the darkness with nothing in it. I even think that his ship is immaterial…

Vika shakes her head and freezes suddenly. I turn around – Unfortunate stands in the corridor.

– I was calling for you, – he says, – I came into the staircase and called. Then just entered, the door was opened.

We don't reply. Then Vika asks:

– You aren't human?

– No, I'm not. Let's go, coffee is ready.

11

We sit and drink coffee; I don't like the girl's from Rostov recipe. Strange that I'm able to distinguish the subtleties of taste at all.

– A choice stuff, – says Unfortunate putting the cup aside, – I think.

– Can you feel the taste? – inquires Vika.

– Yes.

– How comes? Taste in virtuality is nothing more but the memory about what we tried in the real world! If you aren't human, then…

I can feel her aggressiveness growing, but can't do anything.

– I'm trying to imagine whether so much salt should improve the coffee's taste or not. I think not.

– Did you try something like coffee before?

– Only when visited you. I… – Unfortunate looks at me and hesitates,

– I can't even say that I eat at all.

Looks like it's some threshold beyond which Vika loses patience.

– You're lying, – she says with conviction, – Look, you're just lying! You know what? Just go to the Viner Square, it's the UFOlogists' club there! They'll be so glad to meet you! They'll believe you!

– I don't ask you to believe me. – replies Unfortunate softly.

I jump up:

– That's enough, both of you! Vika, I believe him!

– Lenia, you are just convincing yourself! – Vika deliberately ignores Unfortunate. – You aren't the specialist in computer technologies, are you? You couldn't trace his signal and believed in all that? He's human, his behavior and knowledge are human! He's human! Can you prove me wrong?

Unfortunate gazes at the wall.

– I can't. He can. – I look at Unfortunate's face, – Tell her, I beg you. Prove it to her.

– I can't prove anything.

– You helped me to get away from the trap, – I whisper, – I don't know how, but you did give me a part of your strength, your abilities, remember? Please, do the same for Vika!

Unfortunate raises his look at me.

– Leonid, I gave you nothing. I don't have a right to meddle into your life.

– But…

– You could do it, yourself. You only lacked the faith in this to be possible. You needed the goal worth fighting for. You had met me and got this goal, you believed that everything is still ahead, that the

world won't crumble as a house of cards, won't crash down into the deep. I only helped you to find your faith.

I shake my head, no, I couldn't! I couldn't do it myself!

Unfortunate doesn't avert his gaze.

– I gave you nothing Leonid, nothing but troubles. I'm really sorry. I don't have right to make such presents.

– Listen fellow, don't take me in, okay? – says Vika sharply.

– Unfortunate… Alien… – I put my hand on his shoulder, – But you'll have to prove who you are anyway, you'll have to explain, maybe not to us, but to the scientists and politicians…

I stop at the half-phrase. Unfortunate shakes his head.

– I won't explain anything to anybody, this is senseless and not needed.

– But the contact…

– What IS the contact? – he smiles, – A shiny starship on the lawn by the White House? A long legged blonde presents flowers to the purple crocodile in a space suit? The holds full of machines and devices, the galaxy encyclopedia recorded on 1001 synthetic diamond? The cure for cancer and the means to control the weather? Or, rather… something else. Flying saucers burn cities, the mankind leads a guerilla war against the intelligent jellyfish? You'd rather believe in this Leonid, isn't it true? Just remember the man in command of star armies, remember "Labyrinth"! Are these – the contacts? You believed in me, you decided that I'm an alien, that the moment of contact have come…

– But if you came to us, – I shout, – Then there IS something! You do want to say something to us!

– No.

That's it. I understand and it makes no sense to talk any further.

– I just live here. You can't even imagine Leonid how different we are. I'll never step on the ground – I have nothing to step with, and I won't be able to shake your hand – I don't have any.

– But you're human here! – says Vika.

– Yes. If you want to know the sky – become one. If you want to know the star – become the star… – Unfortunate glances at me and smiles, – If you want to know the deep – become the deep. I became the human, as much as it was possible.

– It's your method of knowledge? – asks Vika ironically.

– Yes.

– What for, if we are so different? If we don't need each other?

– I'm tired. I was alone for too long. – Unfortunate either apologizes or tries to convince her, – I needed this memory… the city and the people, the taste of coffee and the smell of fire. It all was alien for me but now will stay forever. Your distrust and Leonid's faith.

Those who were killing me and those who were rescuing. I didn't mean to cause any trouble for you, I didn't want to meddle. This is a norm… not to cause harm.

– Your norm… – I say.

– Yes. You live according to the different laws. It's not for me to judge which ones are better.

– Then you found the best place to appear on Earth, – I nod to Unfortunate, – The freedom and no interference, all life's colors, from black to white.

– Of course.

– For some reason I thought differently, – I say, – That you could not only take from us… the tastes and smells, the words and colors… but also to teach us at least something… No, sure not how to extinguish clouds or to cure flu… At least – kindness.

– Leonid, kindness is just a word. I can't kill a living creature. But it's not a moral, it's more of a physiology.

Now it's really finish.

I wished to find an answer, an ideal, to find a miracle which didn't have a place for it on Earth for a long time. The one that came from the stars or was born by the Net – it doesn't matter. Maybe Man Without Face understood that when he offered me to go into "Labyrinth".

But the miracle doesn't care about us, it's completely alien and its kindness is not more elevated than a contented belch.

– If I try to explain you my ethics, – says Unfortunate, – I'll have to switch to the language of Physics laws and mathematical formulas. If I try to explain science – I'll have to write poems and to paint. Do you understand? The difference is not in the level of development but in the basis itself. We have nothing to take and nothing to give to each other. Whatever I've got is just memories, emotions. But do you really think they'll retain their human form?

– Yes, so I thought.

– It was a mistake, Leonid. I'll leave you soon and everything will change. I'll change myself, and so will my memory.

I step from the table and look into the window, at Deeptown's illumination flashing outside. Man Without Face, maybe you were right? It's impossible to approach Unfortunate with human measures. I tried – and look what came out of it.

– Let's assume, – says Vika behind my back, – that you're not lying. You're really an alien. The one from the stars, let's say, the one who has nothing in common with humans. Then tell me…

Maybe Vika really starts to believe. Now, hiding behind the words "let's assume" she will try Unfortunate about his ethics and culture, about his ship's construction and interstellar journey principles. Good

idea too…

– I'll leave you for a minute, – I say without turning around.

Vika doesn't protest, probably she thought I gonna exit the deep temporarily.

Nope…

The drawn wall, the drawn window – I break through them, make a step and find myself above the city. Buildings, neon signs, pedestrians, cars… I'm not here anymore, my body have vanished, I just glide in the air, as if hackers' dreams and Hollywood directors' fantasies have become true, it's the virtuality as it must be, the freedom of directions and forms.

Further… further…

I make a round around Microsoft's palace, a huge, monstrously bloated building all covered by windows, descend trying to determine the direction towards the Elvish server. Just along this street…

Most likely I'm invisible for others.. I speed above pedestrians' heads, faster than Deep-Transit's cars, switching from server to server.

What am I looking for anyway? For the trace of the battle that was over a couple of hours ago? The virtual time is condensed, there's no traces to find anymore but I must do it anyway.

Here… An Elvish hut, an empty street. A taxi cab blinks in the distance and vanishes. I step on the pavement and turn back into human.

Dibenko's bodyguards' corpses have disappeared already, either they were removed or decomposed by themselves. But at the place where the werewolf was fighting with Man Without Face the asphalt is still melted and pressed in, the only token. So what will it give to me?

I walk around the dent considering whether it'll make any sense to drag search programs from home and to reconnoiter the space. Of course not, the ordinary methods won't help here.

A taxi cab drives from the alley slowly and approaches me, too slowly for it to be a coincidence, Deep-Transit is famous for its speed. Oh well, I had to expect the ambush.

I'm so sure that Dibenko will emerge from the cab that I don't immediately recognize the man that appears.

– Gunslinger? Huh? – exclaims Guillermo cheerfully, approaching me, – You, Gunslinger?

I stay silent. I still like "Labyrinth"'s chief of security service and this is very vexing.

– You're Gunslinger? – requests Guillermo, – I just want to be sure, tell me!

– Hi Willy, – I say. He beams in a smile:

– Hi! I knew it, I knew… – Guillermo eyes the melted asphalt and

tsks, – Cool. It was tough. Yes?

– Yes.

– Gunslinger… – Willy parts his hands, – It's really-really unpleasant to me, honestly! I was even against charging you in damages! But there, – a hurt glance up, – they decided to scare you. This isn't the right method!

– So what's now?

Guillermo sighs and sits right onto asphalt without mercy to his fancy suit. I sit by his side. So here we are, by remains of Romka's funeral fire, like two hippies of different generations, one is settled down but still liberal, the other one in the height of his protest.

– I did suspect that this accident was caused by you, – says Willy, – quite unusual and bloody fight. Yes… I was waiting for you on my own… errr… risk.

– Why? – I ask, – Will you try to detain me? You'll fail. It couldn't be successful before, and even less now.

Guillermo pricks up his ears but doesn't ask anything:

– No-no, Gunslinger! It's absolutely not that I'm sure that our troubles is your fault! Maybe some frictions with Al-Kabar were the reason? Huh?

He winks conspiratorially. Like a quiet rebellion against "Labyrinth"'s management.

– Gunslinger, I'd like to restore our cooperation. After all, you were the first to suspect something unusual in Unfortunate and you shouldn't suffer for that!

– Thanks.

– But we can't be left aside either! Penetration have happened on our territory, right? In juridical sense the question is very complicated, it's easier to solve it in a good will… in a human way. We're humans, aren't we?

What I'd never expect from "Labyrinth"'s guys is such pep. How quickly did they get what's going on!

– Willy, – I say, – It's useless. You know what our common problem is?

– Al-Kabar? – asks Guillermo quickly, – Or Mr X?

– No. Willy, we all want something from Unfortunate. I was dreaming about some kind of goodness for everybody. You know, a common, abstract happiness and stuff which he could bring…

Guillermo nods in understanding.

– You obviously wanted to become famous, to get your share in distribution of technologies that he could give…

A protesting handwave. Oh yeah, sure, "Labyrinth" is not a commercial organization, we heard these songs before…

– Willy, he doesn't want to communicate with us! At all. He

doesn't need us.

It seems that I've really shocked him.

– Doesn't need us? – he exclaims.

– Absolutely. He stopped here to get some rest and now he's going to resume his journey amongst the stars.

Guillermo makes a couple of chewing motions and asks again:

– A journey amongst the stars?

– Yes…

– What stars?

It seems we don't understand each other…

– Willy, Unfortunate is an alien form of life, I think some energy based one, his mind cardinally differs from…

I shut up. Somehow ridiculous does all this sound! Now, when Unfortunate is not near, I feel a kind of scepticism Vika felt.

– Energy based form of life… – repeats Guillermo very politely and gently, as if talking to a sick person, – Yes. Interesting.

Which one of us is the bigger idiot?

– Willy, let's exchange information. To begin our cooperation.

– I think I know your information already, – Willy winks slyly, – Huh?

– But I also can meet Unfortunate at any time and talk to him. Huh?

– Do you have him? – asks Guillermo quickly.

I remain silent.

– As a token of cooperation… – mumbles Willy. Oh, it wasn't his initiative to come here! Or at least, not only his. Now "Labyrinth"'s management decides in panic whether to allow him to talk to me openly or not…

– I can leave, – I note.

– Okay! – Willy raises his hands, – I surrender! You've won, Gunslinger! You've won as usual!

I ignore the compliment but Willie doesn't expect any reaction. He rubs his forehead and pronounces solemnly:

– It was not at once when we evaluated the Unfortunate's phenomenon. It's our big mistake. "Labyrinth"'s attention to its customers have played the positive role though… When yours and our divers' efforts proved useless, we started to search for Unfortunate's entering channel. We searched and searched… and failed.

I'm waiting for the next part. Guillermo winks cunningly and goes on:

– Are you familiar with the parallel worlds theory, Gunslinger?

– From sci-fi literature.

– It's quite a serious theory, Gunslinger. Other worlds might exist in parallel with ours, invisible, unreachable… but quite real ones. We

can't

– yet – communicate with them in a normal way. But virtuality is a different thing. Flows of information live according to their own laws. Computer network is the most powerful device for entropy reduction in the history of mankind. Independently from our will or wish it influences the physical laws of the Universe. Information flows stream along the Net, they condense creating the centers where the very nature of the Universe transforms.

– Information can't change the laws of nature, – I say quickly.

– Oh yeah? When the structure complication happens in the limited fraction of space – it influences the whole Universe. Very weakly of course but the bases of the world vibrate a little anyway. Every object created by humans contained both positive and negative 'charge'. The club carved from the tree branch wasn't just a weapon, no! It was an anomaly phenomenon, an ordered structure in the chaotic world. But this was compensated – at least by the pile of shavings and sawdust. The book became a bit more complicated structure. The volume of information and chaos caused by its creation were not exactly equal already but this phenomenon was also compensated after all

– at least by the fact that many books were not worth the trees cut to make paper for them. What added to that for the first hand, were the books that beared an anomalous complication of information in themselves. I'm not talking about reference books that mostly reflect well known and useless information but about those that led to the birth of new ethics and perception of the world. They started to influence the people's life, to lead to entropy, to destroy. It was like a curse: the more informative the book is, the more did it shake the world. The humans were unable to simultaneously bring an order into the world and not to add chaos. Computers is an absolutely different case, it's information in its purity. It arrives from different directions, it gathers, multiplies. It doesn't vanish without a trace – to give away a file with data is absolutely not the same as to give away a jewel or a favorite book. It tears the Universe's space, violates the balance between the order and the chaos.

Guillermo silences to catch his breath. He's excited, he definitely wanted to tell all this out.

– And so, in such points where the human deeds create the new understanding of the world, where the very human look at the life changes – the unusual happens. The border between the worlds breaks there, and the miracle is being born, and the creature from the other world, maybe a human, maybe not, right?… is able to come to us. To encounter our moral, culture, our dreams… to absorb all net's knowledge in itself… and to freeze, terrified.

What can I answer him? To tell about the fallen star?

– As far as I understand, Unfortunate declared you that he's an alien from the other planet? – asks Guillermo.

I nod. Maybe it's not exactly so though, he never told me directly, he just never rejected my guess.

– Was it his own version or he confirmed your guess?

– Confirmed… – I mumble.

– A normal thing to do, – decides Guillermo, – To admit his own alien nature but to give a wrong direction. He has a right to fear us. His civilization is a peaceful one most likely while we are not the kindest creatures…

It was a long time since I was nudged face forward into the dirt this way.

– We considered different theories, – says Guillermo, – We analyzed Al-Kabar's versions – about the machine mind, mutation that gave birth to the 'human computer'. But… our specialists tend to smile. We were thinking about an alien from the stars. This would be beautiful… too beautiful to be true. We have a good team of psychologists, they work on the data available to us, we have good programmers, they are working too. But still, the theory of parallel worlds remains the most likely one. Al-Kabar worked with people too little, their approach is mechanistic and Urman is too far from modern technologies. No-no. Not a computer mind, not a human merged with a machine. Maybe… – a condescending smile, – an alien. Maybe, – Guillermo's face becomes serious, – a creature from a parallel world. Let's find out together. Without a force, without… any fights, – Guillermo pokes his hand at melted asphalt with disgust, – Let's sit together and talk. Let's forget mistakes, offences, claims. Let's explain that we're not so bad after all, that we shouldn't be feared. Let's stretch our hand…

His hand stretches to me but I'm silent, unable to take and shake it.

Whoever he was, Unfortunate, he tried to help me.

He was – and is – better than many real humans.

– I can't accept your offer Willy, – I say, – I'm sorry. You might be right, but I don't have a right to decide.

– But who has, Gunslinger? – asks Guillermo quietly.

– Only him, Unfortunate. He doesn't want to tell anything. He named himself an alien, a guest who grew tired of loneliness – and now he wants to leave. It's his right. It's his decision. He didn't do anything bad to anybody, he just got lost in our ridiculous world. I helped him to exit, I showed him… I hope I did… that the deep is not bloody fights only. If it wasn't enough – well… let him go, either in his parallel world or to the distant stars. He's free, as much as we are.

Guillermo looks as if he have grown lean. He looks at me, sadly and tiredly. Probably he said the truth, and hardly does he wish bad to Unfortunate. It's just a difference in approaches.

– So you'll let him leave Gunslinger? – he asks, – The mystery will disappear for long, or forever… and nobody will know who was Unfortunate?

– Freedom, Willy.

– You Russians always were considering a state, a society above the person, – says Guillermo, – This isn't the right approach, but you're Russian after all, aren't you?

– I'm the citizen of Deeptown. There's no borders in the Deep, Willy.

Guillermo nods and rises slowly, awkwardly, looks at the cab that waits for him. There's several Al-Kabar commandos inside most likely. Or probably my friends Anatol and Dick…

– Have Unfortunate given anything to you personally, Gunslinger? – asks Willy.

– Probably.

– Can I know what, or see? – inquires he with a sudden shyness.

I look at him, then bend over the crater in asphalt. The werewolf diver perished here two hours ago, my poor workmate Romka. I didn't see how it happened, but I can imagine.

The flame envelops the wolf's body, it means that the Man Without Face's virus had penetrated Romka's computer. His machine's winchester jerks deleting data and damaging utility programs, communication breaks. Romka falls from the deep, from his desperate and hopeless fight.

I feel the smell of burned fur, see the pale fire, the body is squeezed with a spasm… and I vanish, falling through the drawn asphalt, into the long gone comm channel.

The flight.

A flow of sparks pierces my body.

Spiral lightnings sweep at my face.

I feel pain and for the first time in virtuality I understand – it's not an imaginary one. It's just a weak echo of the pain that tortures me in the real world. I'm doing something that a human can't, shouldn't do, I communicate with computers directly, walk through the Net pulling data from programs terminated long time ago.

It's painful, hard but I must overcome that.

It seems that I moan and scream, pressing nonexistent hands against my forehead, a red-hot nails are hammered into my eyes, the skin is torn off with a sandpaper. It's a retribution for the impossible.

When I come back to my senses, there's a door before me.. I'm lying in the corridor, a long and dull one, with hundreds of such doors. Is it one of the virtual hotels?

The pain haven't faded yet but became weaker, softer. It's possible to rise from the floor – very carefully, to lean against the cold wood of the door with forehead.

So you enter virtuality from temporary addresses too, Romka?

I push the door without even thinking that it can be locked and almost fall into the room. Posters with half naked beauties are on the walls, a table with drinks stands by the wall. It looks somehow strange… An unfamiliar man sits with his back towards me, drums at computer keyboard murmuring something out of tune. A half empty bottle of gin and an ashtray full of cigar butts is by his hand. The man is just finishing a glass of cheap 'Hogart'.

– Hi Romka, – I mumble, trying to get a grip against the wall. The man turns around, looks at me in confusion, then jumps up, catches me on his hands and drags towards the armchair.

Now I can let it slip…

Romka brings a full glass of gin under my nose and the smell of juniper finally returns my consciousness.

– Take it away, I'll puke… – I push away his hand.

– Len'ka, is it you? – asks the diver unbelievingly.

– Me…

– Come on, drink, you'll feel better!

– Damned alcoholic, – I whisper something that I never got a nerve to tell him before, – It's you who can gulp pure Gin down.

– Want me to add some tonic? – guesses Romka, – It's fine for me just like this…

He splashes most of the glass' contents out on the floor, fills with

tonic and gives it to me. This time I don't refuse, I drink feeling the blessing numbness streaming all over my body.

– How did you enter? – asks Romka, – The door was closed!

It's too hard to explain why closed doors don't hinder me anymore. I wave my hand and suck in the rest of the liquid.

– And how could you find me?

– I just could… – I answer indefinitely, but it seems that Romka is glad to see me too much to keep trying me.

– Did you manage to get away from that bastard? – he asks.

– Yes…

– What an asshole! – swears Romka, – He busied me alright!

– How did you crawl out?

– The virus was a clean one. It froze my machine but croaked after restart. Everything according to the Convention, but cool, damn it! – Romka laughs forcefully, – What an enemies have you got, Lenia!

– Feel envious?

– Yup! – confesses Romka sincerely, – I feared you'll have no time to escape…

– We had…

– She's pretty fancy, that chick of yours, – winks Romka.

I nod, looking around more attentively. Romka's living place is really strange. All these beauties on the walls… plenty of cigars and alcohol on the table, a couple of fresh issues of Playboy on the bed together with a teens' pop-music related newspaper…

Romka averts his gaze.

– Do I distract you too much? – I ask.

The werewolf glances at the working computer, lines of a primitive program on its screen…

– Not really… I was preparing for a test… Never mind.

– What test?

– Informatics.

– How old are you, Romka? – I ask, suddenly 'regaining my sight'.

– Fifteen.

I start laughing and see how the man opposite me clings his jaws gloomily. I laugh, Romka stands up, lights a cigar, pours Gin into his glass and asks finally:

– Well, and what's so funny?

– Romka… – I understand that I behave badly but I have no strength to hold it back… – Romka, have you ever drink vodka in glass shots or pure Gin?

– No.

– And don't even try. It was really dumb of me not to notice this before. You… you behave with too much fortitude to be an adult man!

– Is it so noticeable? – asks Romka gloomily.

– No, not that much… It's kinda unusual though…

– Why unusual? There's many teens among werewolves.

– How do you know?

– Well… Probably we're more sincere to each other. Those who are older than 18 seldom can live in a non-human appearance. But it's fine for us.

Plasticity… plasticity of mind. I look at Romka and think that there must be a lot of teens among those diver friends of mine who tell dirty anecdotes too excitedly, or always demonstrate their coolness. It's easier for them to pass the barrier of the deep program. Easier – as strange as it might seem. Their mind have grown on the movies and books about the virtual world, they know that Deeptown is drawn not only in their minds but in their hearts too. They won't drown.

Maybe there'll be more of them and divers will stop hiding.

– Romka, do you connect from your computer?

– From Dad's. I was always punished whenever caught in virtuality. Dad thinks it's only debauchery and fist fighting here. So I had to enter somehow… to notice what's going on in the apartment. When the door is opened, I can hear that.

– I'm glad you're fine, Romka.

The werewolf nods:

– And how I'm glad! I have a strimmer, but restoring all disk is a pain. You were looking for me to find out how I am?

I really want to say "yes" but it'll be a lie.

– Not only… I also wanted to ask for your advice…

– And now you don't want to?

He's right, I don't, but after these words I don't have any way out.

– Romka, a strange thing had happened to me… – I rise, pour Gin into my glass, two fingers thick, add tonic. – In the Net I've run into a guy… who is not really a human.

Romka waits patiently.

– I even don't know, where's truth and where's lies, – I say, – Possibly he's an alien from the stars, possibly he's a guest from a parallel world. Or maybe he's a creature of the computer mind or mutant that connects to the Net directly, without a computer. He's being searched for by at least two big companies…

The werewolf nods, I don't need to name "Labyrinth" and Al-Kabar to him.

– … And Dmitry Dibenko.

– Dibenko?

– Exactly. They want to get at least something useful from him. But he wants to leave. Forever.

– And you're thinking whether you have to give him away?

– Nobody can stop him, I'm sure. But in any case… it's a different world, right Romka? A different knowledge, different culture. Maybe they'll manage to persuade him, to learn at least something from him. Just a bit of his knowledge might become a new stage of evolution for the mankind.

– It might, – agrees Romka willingly.

– … Because after all, he could… change me somehow. I would never find your trace without new abilities. I don't know whether I have a right to stay silent and hide him.

– You want my advice? – asks Romka with some sudden fright, – Seriously?

– Yes Romka. Right because you're a kid yet and I'm an old cynicist. Tell me, does one person have a right for a miracle?

– No.

I nod, I didn't expect any other answer, but Romka isn't finished yet.

– Nobody has a right for a miracle. It's always by itself. That's why it's a miracle.

– Thank you, – I say and rise.

– Are you hurt?

– No, on the contrary… I'll go home. It's great that you're fine…

Already in the doorway, I stop for a moment and add:

– …And don't be so hard on alcohol. You're grown-up Romka, don't try to prove it. Good luck on the test.

– Thanks! – shouts Romka behind me.

Miracle – it's on its own…

I walk along the hotel corridor, smiling to Romka's words.

This impatience of mind, this great unsatisfiable thirst…

To understand, to explain, to conquer!

The miracle must be tamed and docile. We even made God a human – and only after this we learned how to believe. We reduce miracles down to our level.

Maybe it's good, otherwise we still would hide in caves, feeding the Red Flower set out by the lightning with wood.

You're a great kid Romka, you managed to get a right conclusion going the wrong way, as if walking along the mirror labyrinth, hitting the glass but passing it after all. I can't yet understand why are you right Romka, but you're right anyway…

I pass by an indifferent porter, open the door – Deeptown street, people, cars, neon signs. I know what can change the world. I can give a miracle to the world.

But I have no right to – because it's alive.

It's on its own, there's neither our life, nor our joys, nor our griefs behind it. What does separate me from Unfortunate – a cold of space

of unimaginable eternity of the other world? What's the difference, he's alive anyway!

I walk along the street not raising my hand for the joy of Deep-Transit, this is known in all details Russian block, I'll manage on feet. I need to understand Unfortunate completely before he leaves forever, I have to say, to do something.

The church block – gold covered domes of the Orthodox temple, Catholic cathedrals, modest synagogues and Moslem minarets, stone lace of Alexandrians' temple, black pyramid of Satanists, and – as the best of all mocks – a fiery red sign above the pub, the den of friendly, suffering from a little overweight sect of Beer Lovers.

I could show you much, Unfortunate. Zoos where Steller's cows and mammoths live, book clubs where they argue over good and clever books, exhibitions of spatial designers where new worlds are being born, a medical conference where the doctors from all over the world meet to consult a patient from some God forsaken provinces… They won't let us to the conference of course, but I'd hack the door and we would stay silently in the corner watching how an American anesthesiologist and a Russian surgeon plan a surgery for a miner from Zaire… I would take you to the Opera where every musician is the citizen of the world and to the play where everybody in the audience is a part of the action. We would bow to all gods in temples forgetting that they are evil. We would stand by the playground where kids ride 'real' racing cars and would sympathize with Greenpeace people who save hedgehogs on European highways. Deeptown's picture gallery would take at least a month – it's impossible to pass at once through the Hermitage and the Prado gallery, the Tretyakov's Gallery and the Louvre… But at least one day you could sacrifice for that instead of sitting under "Labyrinth"'s blood-red sky. In the student block you would help a freshman from Vologda to conquer the Resistance of Materials course's mysteries, and I'd tell the Canadian artist why it's not necessary to make too much detailed elaboration for the autumn forest. The deep isn't an evil world at all, not a fist fight and debauchery. Is it my fault that your way here had passed through fighting arenas and brothels, with pursuit on your heels and uncertainty ahead?

But who knows, maybe it wasn't just a coincidence. You had chosen this path yourself: "Labyrinth", "Stars and Planets", "Any Amusements" and the Elvish Lorien… You absorbed the deep and showed, not to yourself but to me, what it really is, all intolerance and stupidity, all aggression that lives inside us. And you know not worse than me: the virtual world doesn't consist of this only.

Such a pity that you're right after all, Unfortunate. The world is never judged on its best qualities. Otherwise fascism would be a

golden age of technics, of fast planes and mighty engines instead of concentration camps' chimneys and a soap made of the human fat.

You've made your judgement and explained why it is so.

Do we have any right to feel hurt?

Do we have any right to hit ourselves in the chest and shout "We're kind!" ?

But you can't, you shouldn't take just this with you – a human dirtiness and the beauty of desolate mountains, the technology serving vice! Otherwise why we are in the deep? What do we worth at all?

… I'm standing by the door of the Catholic cathedral, luxurious and suppressing, great and ridiculous. I can enter and pray to an ancient God that doesn't exist after all. I can return home and shake Unfortunate's hand in parting. And neither decision will be right.

– Leonid?

The person that approached me is completely unfamiliar: he's short, with unexpressive dull face, dressed in old shabby jeans and stretched sweater. He's dull and ordinary, not in virtuality is his place but in the queue for carry-out Zhigulevskoye { *beer* }. But he knows my name – it means he's an enemy.

– Who are you from? – I ask, – Al-Kabar?

The shortish guy doesn't avert his look.

– Leonid, you saw me in a different appearance. Without face.

– Dmitry?

– Yes. Maybe we should address each other less officially?

– You're an asshole, – I agree.

– Leonid, I ask you for a talk, for just five minutes of talk.

Is it really the main Dima Dibenko's guise? I saw his picture, long time ago, he was too young on it. So, he's plain and ordinary? A little dog

– a puppy forever. Was it this guy who invented the deep program and dunked the whole world into the deep? The one who grabbed millions and had got the share in Microsoft and AOL? The one who was the first to understand that Unfortunate is a visitor from the Outside?

– Five minutes.

– Leonid, let's go somewhere…

At least his voice doesn't correspond with his looks too well: if he ever could speak in requesting voice, it's now in the past.

We walk around the cathedral, Dibenko opens the door into the garden with the intricate key. It's quiet and silent here, willows, poplars, straight paths… stones… of familiar shape.

– Shit, – I just say.

– Yes, it's a graveyard, – mumbles Dibenko, – I… I like to come here. It calms me down somehow… brings me a philosophical mood.

Probably there's nothing unusual in this. I look at grave monuments, at the alleys, at the girl that sits on the grass by the small bust, hiding her face in her hands. It's not a mourning human, it's just a drawn weeper, an electronic equivalent of marble angels.

Virtuality is life but life can't be thought about without death. So friends bury here those who will never dive in the deep again, will never put on the virtual helmet anymore.

"He believed in the miracle" – short like a curse, the phrase on the nearest stone.

Forgive me, anonymous man. You believed in miracles and jumped into colorfulness of the virtual world. But now, the memories of you lie here, and somewhere in reality your grave overgrows with tall weeds. Your friends come here spending half a dollar while the soil that took you gives birth to a new life. Maybe it would be more honest for your friends to expend a couple of hours of their lives – to get a shot of vodka by your real grave?

It's freedom! I'm not the one to judge.

– I'm listening, Dima.

Dibenko has red eyes, as if he lacked sleep lately, and crumpled face. He dragged me into the miracle which doesn't need me, he finishes divers off as blind kittens. But he created this world and I must listen to him.

– I don't ask how you got away, Lenia, – says Dibenko, – As I understand, you've got your reward after all…

– What reward? For what?

– For betrayal, – Dibenko looks me straight into the eyes, – What, does the word hurt? It *is* betrayal! Betrayal of all of us, all the people that live today! You've managed to become his friend, I knew you'll be able to do this, I knew and that's why I hired you, you and nobody else! It must have been a mistake. What I could offer in return was nothing…

– Dima, do you understand what have virtuality become?

– The freedom!

– Then what do you blame me for? We are in no right to demand anything from Unfortunate! In NO right!

– And why not? – Dibenko leans against the tombstone of the "miracle believer" and smirks, – Okay, let it not be formulas and drawings… not vaccines and recipes of the fair society. But couldn't he at least give us hope? To all of us! If he came – it means everything will be fine! If he exists – it means we didn't choke to death on the freedom!

Looks like I miss something again.

But Dibenko goes on and I stay silent.

– Do you think I knew what I was doing then?… No! I got drunk,

sozzled, plastered! I glued myself to the machine, I neither wanted to sleep nor to play, I felt sick of work, I began to compose a color palette, some image rhythm… I really wanted to add music to it but the machine was a piece of crap, without a sound card!

So the legends are true…

– I don't know how! – shouts Dibenko, – It was IT that wanted to be born, not me who did it! It's the deep itself, came through me – into the world! I understood, I felt it – but I'm not a creator, just a conductor, a pen moved by somebody's hand! It reached me from far away, through the darkness, through the silence, reached me and made me to create! It! The deep program!

I suddenly shiver, and not because Dmitry mentioned the silence, just because this feeling is familiar to me too: a terror of the creator who can't understand what and how he created.

– Some people called me genius… – a little man with shadows under his eyes grabs my hands, – Others called me a dumbass who found the pearl in a pile of dung! But neither is true! The deep came into the world through me. It means – somebody wanted that to happen! Not now… later…

Dibenko looks at me, with greed and awe, whispers:

– Did he tell you at least anything? Just a hint… where is he from? A year, century, millennium?

– Dima… – I mumble, – Just why do you think…

– When you escaped, – whispers Dibenko, – You were trapped, you couldn't escape from my machine. But you did… you blasted all data away from the disk and escaped! Was it him who taught you? Was it?

It's a pity to look at him. I don't like pity so much – it kills as well as the hate does, but now I want to pity Dibenko.

But just the voice… his voice doesn't sound right. This is how a great actor in the tragic role can humiliate himself.

– You can't even imagine, – says Dibenko, – how much effort have I spent for this! What I was risking with… with my position in Al-Kabar's Board of directors, with my agents in "Labyrinth"… You wouldn't understand, you still can't understand that over there, in Russia… But I split you up, I traced your channel! I know who you are! Leonid, I know your address in Deeptown! Polyana Company, apartment 49. You're in my hands! I can find out your real address too! But I don't want to threaten you, I just ask: let's be together!

Looks like the time have made a full circle, not Guillermo but Dmitry Dibenko offers me his hand now.

– They can't understand, – he whispers, – Whatever. Aliens from parallel worlds, space aliens, machine mind… Bull! There's nothing out there but us! In the past or the future days – only us!

I understand…

– One can believe or one can laugh, – Dibenko hits his fist against the poor tombstone, – But the only thing without borders is the Time. Computer network lives and will live, and the memory about this guy will outlive all of us! Information doesn't have any limit in time, Unfortunate, he peeked into the past of the humankind. From that wonderful 'far away' to which we will never live to see, from the future of the Earth – he stepped into the virtual world's childhood. Okay, okay, let us be ugly and wild! But can't he tell us at least something? Can't he give us… a faith?

– Dmitry, but why? Why do you think so?

– Because I know! – Dibenko looks into my eyes, – I couldn't create the deep program accidentally! It's as if I would shoot – and hit a thousand targets in a row! I'm not a genius at all, I'm an ordinary man. Just there, in the future, they decided to create virtuality. Possibly, it was predetermined. Maybe they just needed a bridgehead… an observation point to look into our world. So I became… a pen in someone's hand…

– A bridgehead? – I ask, – A bridgehead means war.

– Yes! And one must kill at war… and to take prisoners.

– Do you know how many hypotheses exists about Unfortunate?

– Yes.

– What if he's not from the future but from another world?

– Let it be! Even more reasons then! He's in our world and here are our laws! We must understand who is he.

What does he want from me after all?

I look at Dibenko: trembling lips, tired eyes, shabby and low appearance. What does he want? Does he want me to change my mind? Does he want me to hand Unfortunate over to him? In any case it's not in my powers. We'll just waste the time…

The time…

He knows my name and address. He knows where I live in virtuality.

He even could trace me at Romka's place.

And now he's biding his time.

I step back and rush to the gates. Dibenko looks as I leave not trying to stop me, only a smile appears on his face – a proud smile of an actor who played his role well and now listens to an applause.

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The cab rushes past me as if my raised hand doesn't mean anything anymore in Deeptown. I jerk after the car, wave my hand again…

Useless. This is war.

How did Dibenko manage to cut me from Deeptown's transportation system? Possibly he has a share there too?

Well, but I don't need Deep-Transit anymore, do I?

An already familiar feeling when the city around falls flat turning into a scheme. I soar above it, drag myself through the distance, through foreign computers – towards my house…

… And I hit the wall.

I can see the house, a highrise inhabited by things – but I can't get inside. Something have changed in the space itself.

I make myself real, not inside the building itself, on the sidewalk by it.

The house is burning.

It's not a fire but a fantastic illumination. The walls are changing the color and brightness, each grain shines like a diamond. The whole house is like a ridiculous squarish diamond under the floodlight ray.

And there are people, many people: uniforms of the city's security service, "Labyrinth"'s and Al-Kabar's guards… The ring of cordon around the house, snipers with carbines, machine-gunners behind transparent shields, the gunners with jet knapsacks floating in the air. I emerged inside the ring, and hundred of barrels aims at me instantly.

The spiders have made a deal and have spread their web together.

– Leonid! Raise your hands and come closer! – the voice booms above the street. A group of people can be seen behind the ring of guards, in the rainbow flashes of illumination: Urman, Willy, Man Without Face, commissar Jordan Reid.

Wow.

What an honor for me! Where can a poor diver go? All official and unofficial rulers of the deep have gathered by his house!

– Leonid, come closer, slowly! – repeats Reid. His voice echoes along the street.

At least they are trying to keep an impression of their actions being lawful: the operation is carried out by the police. I walk under the aiming barrels, under the scrutiny of hundreds of computers, every step of mine is measured and estimated, every byte of data is under invisible control…

The guards in front of me give way letting me in. Guillermo looks aside. Urman – who in fact is just Urman's secretary – smirks

mockingly. Dibenko, in his mask again, is indifferent.

I address to Reid ignoring them all:

– What's going on?

– You're charged with unlawful penetration into secured information space, in using weapons which caused a serious material damage, in hiding the information that is vitally important for Deeptown, – raps Jordan out, – You're detained for examining the circumstances.

– And what is my house charged with? – I ask, but it's impossible to confuse Reid:

– The search for the evidence is being carried out.

I turn around to the burning building. Search? Hell no! Conservation. Freezing. Overflowing of comm channels with data. Will Unfortunate be able to deflect the attack or even his powers won't be enough here?

– I surrender, – I say, – I admit all charges. I request… this to be stopped.

Jordan shakes his head, with a slight sympathy in his look but with determination.

– Don't try to hide in reality, – he warns, – We requested Interpol for your physical arrest.

The dread rolls over me – extinguishing the will, taking all strength away. Who knows, maybe there, back in reality, gloomy commandos in black fabric masks already stand behind my back?

A real prison, a real trial – this isn't an excitement of virtual fights. It's a rotten hay mattress, a skilly which recipe haven't changed since Stalin's times, bars on the window and escort guards not blemished with an intellect.

Or my dear native police haven't yet learn to work fast despite it's desperate wish to exchange the Russian citizen for a dozen of obsolete portable radio communicators?

Abyss-abyss – and to run…

I look at drawn faces, at the armed guards. There's no borders for the miracle hunters. They've dived into the deep from all corners of the world – in order to tear off, to rip out a piece of mystery, wherever could it be brought into our world from.

And frenzy takes me over.

– Jordan… I give you exactly ten seconds… – I whisper, – To all of you. Ten seconds to get your asses out of here.

– Collect yourself, Leonid! – this is Reid.

– Gunslinger, let's find a compromise… – this is Willy.

– Your strength has its limits too… – Man Without Face.

Oh my God, they fear me! Me! Alone against them all, primed, with an ancient computer behind and an empty hands!

Why?

– I don't know how you still hold out, – starts Dibenko, – but…

– Five seconds, – I say.

And the guards start shooting, either without an order or I just have missed it.

The fire and pain.

Everything that was invented for years of the deep's existence, everything well tested and most secret – everything for my honor…

I stand in the middle of the fire and see the dread on the faces around me, and even in the gray fog of Man Without Face – the dread…

Why am I still here, remaining in virtuality instead of taking the helmet off before the gray display of the killed machine?

I pull myself towards the guards, not with hands, just with a gaze – their bodies crumple like fabric puppets under the heel, fall apart in ashes, drain of steam, freeze, collapse into points, dissolve in the air, as if my gaze reflects all nastiness that pours my way.

Five seconds given for my enemies pass and the street is empty, just my house still burns and those who had set fire to it stand near.

– It's in the deep only where you're God, – says Man Without Face. He doesn't threaten me, just reminds.

– Oh really? – I pad closer to them, – Reid, now IRS computers will learn that you had misappropriated a couple of millions… Urman! All Al-Kabar's data is in free access! Willy! "Labyrinth" is dead! Levels are deleted, maps are lost, monsters have fled! Dima! Your fingerprints belong to a serial killer!

I give them a couple of seconds to conceive that and add:

– One minute… and it will be so!

I don't know if it's possible, I don't know the limit of my powers, I even don't know where they came from.

But they believe me.

– What do you want, diver? – shouts Urman. Reid shoulders him aside and roars:

– Your conditions!

Did I guess right about his taxes?

– You'll stop the hunt.

The miracle is before them. But they have what to lose.

Urman and Guillermo look at each other, Al-Kabar's director nods.

– We cancel our charges Jordan, – says Willy, – It's not necessary… to engage Interpol.

He nods to me very slightly. So it was just a threat?

Lies. Lies everywhere.

With a corner of my eyes I can see people approaching us along

the street, the ordinary citizens of Deeptown. Now, as the cordon is gone, they can satiate their curiosity.

Let them watch.

Jordan grabs Dibenko's shoulder and shakes him slightly:

– Did you hear that? The operation is over! That's it! Turn your systems off!

So it was Dmitry who froze the building? Police had not enough guts for that?

Man Without Face shoves commissar aside, he looks at me only. He's the only one who doesn't care about my threats. Not because he doesn't believe in them and not because he's ready to compete with an American juridical system, totally run through with computer technologies.

He's not ready to refuse the miracle. We're compatriots after all, the highest idea had screwed up our brains alike, even if in different directions. A whisper comes from the foggy mask:

– You're betraying the entire world…

– I'm rehabilitating it.

– You don't want to share, diver. You've got your reward… and betrayed us. Ah well. Don't forget to take the Medal – you'll have something to justify yourself with.

I remember the warehouse, the boxes with soft, the table where the Medal of Complete Licence was left.

I reach through the distance that is no more, and the heavy medal lies into my hand. I examine it for a second: the white background and the rainbow colored sphere, the cobweb of the Net surrounded by innocence and purity.

– This is yours, – I say and throw the Medal to Man Without Face. The medal touches the black fabric of the cloak and sticks to it. Nice…

– I haven't earned that. And you… you created the deep, and stop repeating that you couldn't do it. You could. By yourself. Thank you. But don't think that we all owe you anything. This world will live, will fall and learn to stand up after that. It'll never force to talk anybody who wants to stay silent, and will never shut the mouth of the ones who want to talk. And probably it'll become better…

I turn around and walk towards my house.

Dibenko haven't yet turned off the programs that froze the building in the diamond crust. But I ain't gonna ask him for anything. I pull the door and enter the staircase that shines as Aladdin's Cave of Wonders. It's just that illumination dims behind my back, fades completely. I rip the foreign program, gaining step after step from it.

I ascend, just two and a half hundred steps to go up.

Rustles and noises can be heard behind each door, my drawn little world livens up as I pass by. Fragments of music and muffled

talks, rattle of shattering glass and rhythmical hammer hits, slaps of bare feet against the floor and squeal of a drill can be heard from behind my back.

I can't even remember now, when and what was I programming surrounding myself with nonexistent neighbors. Weirdo am I. Just as anybody is…

I know that I can remove all freezing at once, with one effort, but I don't do that. Let the way up will be slow, step by step, sweeping the false sparkle from the walls, waking up the life in empty apartments. I'll never enter this house again.

Baby's whimpering and the buzz of a broken faucet, dog's barking and goblets' ringing. I have nothing to memorize and nothing to be sad about. These were my crutches but I've learned to walk on my own.

The last bend of the stairs, for a moment I stop by my door made of diamond grains. My tiny face is in every one of them, one of the numerous faces I was putting on in the deep.

I breathe at the door – the diamonds dim, darken turning into icicles, melting and flowing down in water droplets. Cry for me abyss, I have nothing to cry for.

I enter and instantly see that nothing have changed inside, Dibenko's program had no power here.

Unfortunate and Vika stand by the window, looking outside.

I approach – and Vika silently takes my hand into her, and we look at Deeptown, three of us.

The street is swarming with people, a dense solid crowd, Deep-Transit's cabs stay a bit further along the sides of the street and people still keep coming in order to freeze, looking up at the house.

And only right under the window the people give place, there's a ring of emptiness surrounding Man Without Face. He also looks up as if being able to see us. I even want to believe that he can.

– He's not evil at all, – I say to Unfortunate, – He's only impatient.

– I don't accuse anyone, – agrees Unfortunate.

– Then leave, – I ask, – It's high time for that.

He looks at me for some time, the one who came into the deep as Unfortunate, as if trying to see my real face, to understand what I might feel now.

– Are you hurt? – he asks in the end.

– No. Just upset, but this is different.

– I feared that you'll be hurt: I broke your dream, didn't I?

– Which one?

– You dreamed that virtuality will change the world, will make it cleaner, will give power and kindness to the people. You tolerated what angered you, smiled to what annoyed you…

Unfortunate stretches his hand, puts it on top of my and Vika's joined palms.

– You believed in the moment… one single moment that would redeem all sins and mistakes. I killed this faith.

It's even funny for me to listen to these words. Does he really think so?

Did I really think so?

– It's not the deep, Unfortunate, – I say, – Not this deep.

He nods.

– Do you remember the mirror labyrinth, Leonid?

Sure I do…

– The deep gave you millions of mirrors diver, the magic mirrors. One can see himself, one can see the world – any of its corners. One can draw the world and it'll become alive, reflected in the mirror. This is a wonderful gift. But mirrors are too obedient diver, obedient and deceitful. The mask put on once becomes the face. The vice turns into finesse, the snobbery into elite stuff, the spite into sincerity. The journey into the mirror world isn't an easy stroll, it's too easy to get lost.

– I know…

– That's only why I'm talking to you – because you know. I would like to be your friend too, Leonid.

He smiles sadly, then adds:

– But it would be a very strange friendship…

– Alien and Russian – brothers forever? – inquires Vika sarcastically. { *A mock of the Stalin's times song: "Stalin and Mao watch upon us… […] Russian and Chinese – brothers forever."* } So Unfortunate didn't convince her, not at all. For her he's still a human, a cunning hacker taking everyone in…

I'm mirthless but I say:

– I'm not asking who you are. Believe it or not, but I don't care… An alien from the stars or from another dimension, or the machine mind. But you know much more then we do anyway. Tell me, what will happen?

– It depends in what mirror you are looking, diver.

– Then I'll choose, Unfortunate, and I'll be very picky. Now – leave.

He removes his hand from ours.

For a second nothing happens, then the wall behind hid back starts bending, curling up into a funnel.

Unfortunate makes a step back, into the shiny tunnel leading towards unknown, towards the blue sun and orange bands flying beneath it, into his world. His body shivers and blurs, cascades of colorful sparks streaming from his skin. For a moment it seems to me

that I can see – see the one who visited our world.

But most likely, I just want to give the miracle a name too much.

– Remember us… – I say to escaping flashes of light, – Remember us as we are…

The house begins to shake, the walls become transparent, then pale green, then brick ones, then made of paper. The ceiling crawls up and bends in a dome, the floor turns into the mirror, the light in the window passes all spectrum colors and burns our silhouettes on the paper wall. The apartment turns into a huge hall as if all directions were stretched by an order.

The tunnel narrows slowly, but there's still time… to jump after Unfortunate – and to see where he came from, to tear the mask from the miracle.

– Lenia, what is this? – shouts Vika.

– The data, – I answer. The wind begins to blow through the apartment, a room pomegranate in a flowerpot blossoms, a pile of CDs on the shelf starts playing all songs simultaneously. – He copies the data, brings everything he learned with himself.

Half transparent shadows rush past us. Alex with the carbine at ready runs by, then a monstrous spider rushes by, stepping with its paws, that imaginary family which we rescued in "Labyrinth" goes down the tunnel too. A huge tree flies away, rotating as a propeller, a hobbit with a scared muzzle minces out, a flying Man Without Face's guard with a fire breathing jet knapsack stalks out in huge jumps.

Then me and Vika walk in. Hand in hand.

– Remember us, – I repeat, – Remember…

The tunnel narrows more like a cameras's aperture. At the last moment the flying slippers of Computer Wiz squeeze into it, flapping their wings.

Then the room returns to normal.

– I don't believe that he's an alien anyway, – says Vika, in unsure voice but stubbornly, – If he's a good hacker, then he could…

She silences when I hug her shoulders.

– Please Vika, don't, – I ask, – He have left, haven't he? Forever. It's not necessary to argue now, we can just believe.

There's a noise in the street, an exchange of opinions. Have they seen at least anything of what we did? It doesn't matter. The new legend was born in the deep.

– He have left, but we stay, – says Vika, – and there's a hunt after you.

I nod, slowly releasing her, step to the window and look down. Man Without Face is still motionless.

– Leonid the diver must leave too. – I agree.

– Will you miss your house? – asks Vika. How great it is when it's

not necessary to explain anything.

– A little… like I'd miss a kiddie's three-wheeler.

I return to her and hug again, her lips find mine.

And this is something that will never leave from now on.

– Abyss… – I call silently.

The house shakes again when the rental server in distant Minsk receives the command. Magnetic head slides along the disk surface – deleting.

One turn – and the first floor with the scandalous pensioner disappears. Another turn – and the sixth floor with the quiet graphomaniac is gone, another – and the tenth floor with vinyl collector is no more.

My computer livens up and the apartment walls fade. I don't look at the table, but I know well that the drawn Vika on the display smiles to me – for the last time. Programs don't feel sad when we delete them, people do but I have no choice. If you get lost in the mirror labyrinth – break the mirrors, reach for the light…

A crowd bursts into shouts when my house dissolves in the air. Poor Jordan will have to prove that it wasn't his fault.

We fly above Deeptown in a hug, looking into each other's eyes.

– Great… – whispers Vika.

– I have no idea myself how I do it…

– You have no idea how you're kissing? – she asks in surprise.

… No, never will I understand a woman's logic.

By the connection of the Ukranian and Baltic blocks, near a supermarket, I find a quiet spot between phone booths and a fountain. This is where we come out from. Not at once though.

– You're erasing all your traces? – inquires Vika.

I nod in silence.

– Do you hope they'll not find you?

– I'll try. Maybe they'll be able to figure the city out… but even this isn't likely. It would be better if they won't know even this.

– What about trusting me?

– St. Petersburg, – I say. I want so much to hear that we're compatriots, but Vika frowns.

– Piter… Lenia, wait here, okay?

I wait. She runs into the supermarket while I reach the Minsk server again, checking for any trace that might have left, then move along all spare addresses, even along those never used – and kill them scratching all data from everywhere mercilessly – from strimmers and magnetooptics, Bernulli's storage and optical disks. The last one to be cleaned is my ISP's disk. That's it. Now I never entered the deep.

Vika returns.

– Got into a long waiting line, can you imagine? – she laughs.

– An urgent shopping?

– One thing.

She waves a farsightedly folded plane ticket before my face, I just can see where is she about to fly.

– Are you free in the morning?

– Don't you fear to fly?

– What can I do, it'd be too long by all other means… Will you meet me?

– What flight?

– Wait for me by the information booth at ten in the morning.

A little game of independency… I can reach the cash register in the supermarket right now and find out who and from where have just bought the ticket to St. Petersburg.

But of course I won't do that.

– How will I recognize you?

Vika shrugs her shoulders.

– We'll see. How about you?

– I'll hold a red rose in my teeth, – I inform gloomily.

I can understand Vika perfectly. One thing is to fall in love in the virtual world, while to meet in reality is an absolutely different case. It's too scary to talk about yourself. I don't know whether I would have guts to offer to meet first.

– Then see you at ten by the info booth, – decides Vika, – Let's try not to be confused?

– Okay.

– I'll leave now, alright? – she half asks, half informs, – I yet have to gather my stuff…

– It's cold here already, – I warn.

– Here too…

Vika becomes half transparent and crumbles in a whirl of sparks. Beautiful is her exit from the deep.

My time is up too.

I wink to a passer-by who stopped watching Vika's exit and disappear from virtuality.

The screens were dark. Completely.

I took the helmet off.

The golden background of Windows-Home was glowing on the display, Vika is gone.

Enough of loving the drawn people.

We'll exit the Internet manually…

I opened the terminal window and stared at the blinking line dumbly.

No dialtone!

I'd better pay my phone bills in time.

I picked up the phone anyway and listened to the silence. Then I checked the logs: the phone was disconnected three hours ago, by the end of the working day, according to the habits of phone switchboard workers.

So you were right, Mr Urman's virtual secretary… It's really possible to enter the deep without any technical devices.

I pulled the suit off and lagged myself to the bed.

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The TV set woke me up. I was lying, snuggling in the comforter – the heat wasn't yet turned on, so it was cold, and listened to announcers' chatter. { *The heating in Russia is mostly centralized, meaning: one boiler station for a part or even for a whole town/city… so the time of turning the heating on in fall or off in spring doesn't depend on the wish of those who lives in houses at all… The hot water supply comes from the same source. Now imagine what happens when this boiler station goes down in the middle of the winter for a couple of weeks… OOPS. Tons of fun. :-/* } Politics, economics, currency exchange rates… Will yesterday's commotion in virtuality make it to the news reports I wonder? Maybe it will, somewhere between the news about a popular singer's arrival and sports, among the rest of the funny things. Television likes to make reports from Deeptown. It's funny for a philistine to watch cartoony landscapes and drawn people. Probably it's good that we're laughed at, if only we weren't feared… weren't hated…

I raised my head and glanced at the watch scared, they must have been stopped since yesterday. A usual thing, I always forget to wind it. I found the remote control lying by the bed and displayed the time on the TV screen.

7 AM. Good, I won't be late.

The whole body was feeling broken-down, the head was heavy as always after the series of long and frequent dives. A human isn't adapted to virtuality too well. Maybe a year or two will pass and the moment of requital will come to all Deeptown's citizens: some kind of paralysis, blindness, heart attacks. Then Dibenko's name will be dragged through the mud, the companies that made their bets on virtuality will ruin, and serious scientists will report that they foresaw it long time ago and were restlessly warning…

We'll see. In any case I'll have a chance to feel the disaster among the first.

Or maybe on the contrary – the breakthrough I was dreaming about and Dibenko was waiting for will happen. What I could do yesterday will become possible for everybody. Two worlds merged together: virtuality and reality, just make one step and enter the deep, without any crutches…

I rose and made my bed, washed the floor, wiped the dust, then raked all clothes out from the closet and was digging in the pile for five minutes in search for anything decent. It's too hard to take care of your wardrobe if you got used to draw all your clothes, from briefs to tuxedo.

Jeans and sweatshirt. Will do.

Dressed, I walked along the apartment once more glancing at the computer that was working all night long. A line was slowly crawling across the screen: "Lenechka, the deep is waiting!"

Let it wait.

No, my attempts to make an apartment to look any better failed. The chronic chaos of the single's apartment was only enhanced by clean floor and the garbage removed out of sight. Oh well… let's appear in complete beauty. If Vika ever dealt with hackers, she won't be scared.

I turned the computer off, and being at the exit already, I remembered that even haven't attempted to get the kitchen into order… Oh no, that's enough, this deed isn't for me.

After closing the door hastily, I called the elevator. The plastic button, burned through by a cigarette butt was hardly glowing. It was heavily smoked inside the cabin for some reason.

Not so beautiful as in the deep, sure not.

The elevator dragged me down slowly, past ten floors, past my neighbors of the concrete box whom I didn't know, and even never attempted to know. One can think out other's lives, can sympathize and mock nonexistent people… But how hard is it to know them – those alive and real ones, to make just a step closer.

What if Vika won't come? What if she changes her mind, feeling the same thing that I did: one cannot merge two worlds?

I imagined myself in the airport – a ridiculous figure, a fugitive from the virtual world crawled into the world of alive. The pale untanned mug, clothes that never require ironing, the eyes, red as the druggie's. And then Vika appears, beautiful and slender, fashionably dressed… or maybe even worse. A stooping girl in glasses comes out, in baggy dress and the coat of several years ago's fashion…

God knows what would be worse…

I quietly moaned, almost living through our common shame and mutual disappointment. Elevator doors parted right at this moment and a little girl with a terrier led on a leash stepped back scared.

Oh great, now even kids dash aside…

I squeezed past the cheerful dog and dragged myself down along the stairs towards the exit.

– Good morning! – said the girl quietly behind me.

I forgot how to greet people, didn't I?..

– Good morning, – I replied, smiling belatedly and ran outside.

For some reason I'm sure that Unfortunate wouldn't forget to say that, he would even also pat the dog on the neck and the dog would plop on its back, pleased.

I had enough money now, I could even take a taxi to the airport

proudly but I didn't want to hurry. I feared that wait, oh how I feared it… I had a couple of hamburgers for breakfast by some kiosk, warmed up ones but obviously not fresh made. I wanted beer but under the seller's condescending look I dared for soda only.

The bus to the airport was almost empty. Some sleepy company with huge trunks, girls with a very bright make-up according to the latest fashion. I stood in the back of the bus watching the belt of the road crawling away.

Maybe I shouldn't go…

It was a quarter before ten when the bus stopped at the airport. I crawled out with an optimism of the one condemned to execution, stood under the drizzling rain for some time before entering the building.

Maybe the weather is too bad for flights…

It was warm and noisy in the airport. The kids, excited by the flight ahead were running around their parents, the 'shuttle merchants' were gloomily dragging their packs along, the line of lightly dressed people was forming for registration for some Southbound flight. { *'Shuttle merchants' – a kind of tiny business, common to Russia. They travel to China, Turkey or some other country, buy the goods from wholesalers or on local markets (usually these are dirt cheap clothes of crappy quality), and *personally* take those back to Russia (by a charter flight when several merchants hire a plane or just by a regular passenger flight). Then the goods are either sold (personally again) on some retail (flea-kind) market or are resold to smaller merchants (yeah, there are even smaller ones!)* } I studied the flight info on the display – there were no delayed arrivals.

Maybe Vika didn't come…

Four planes have landed during last half an hour. Vika could have come from Tashkent, Riga, Khabarovsk or Moscow… And if she set the time with reserve, then all Russia is at her disposal and almost all of the abroad.

I lagged to the info booth, several people was standing there but neither woman looked like Vika to me, I felt that from the very first sight.

All faces are so much different, so many homely, tired and worried ones. It's not so in the deep, and to no purpose possibly…

I leaned against the wall and waited. Half an hour is my usual indulgence to women's unreliability… But I'll make an exception for Vika, will wait for an hour. Or two. I'll stick to this wall until militia unglues me.

So good would it be to have a good notebook now, with radio modem, to run the deep program, to dive, to search through all airline companies' files…

I closed my eyes.

The deep was lying before me.

The black velvet, the bottomless precipice, pierced by colorful threads. The tiny sphere of the Earth that tried a new apparel on. The deep was waiting, I could see sparks of the planes leaving and landing, whirlpools of information processed by computers, I saw a distant Deeptown's buildings. Just to reach out – and I'll be there, I don't need machines anymore.

Somebody nearby, right in the airport, was entering the deep using his notebook. I stood behind his back for a moment and looked with his eyes.

This is my world.

The generous and boundless, noisy and slovenly, the human one. It'll become better, will change with us, we just need to believe in this, not to wander in labyrinths when the exit is near, not to fall in love with reflections when alive people are by our side. And possibly the next visitor to the deep won't become the only Unfortunate who can't shoot at the people.

I exited the Net, the figures have changed on electronic wall clock: ten sharp.

– And where's the red rose?

It was the most dreadful – to turn and to look at Vika, harder than all feats in the virtual world…

She was exactly the one I was drawing, the one that smiled to me from the screen every morning. The one that lived in my dreams.

Just her hair are a little lighter and the haircut is a bit shorter, and her eyes don't laugh – they are scared… just like mine are now. But this is my Vika, the girl in jeans and light jacket, with the bag over her shoulder.

We both lived in our real bodies in the deep. The best mask in the world is your own face.

– This rose is still being grown, – I say.

Vika relaxes a little.

– I feared… that you'll promise me to draw it.

– Oh no, – I whisper, – Enough of drawn flowers…

I take her hand, we'll stand here like this for a second, looking into each other's eyes.

Before we go home.